THE LIFE AND FRIENDSHIPS OF MARY RUSSELL MITFORD

W. J. ROBERTS.

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MARY RUSSELL MITFORD

MY COTTAGE in "OUR VILLAGE".

M R Mitford

Miss Mitford's Cottage at Three Mile Cross.

(From a lithograph published by Mr. Lovejoy, *of Reading, while Miss Mitford was in residence.)*

MARY RUSSELL MITFORD

The Tragedy of a Blue Stocking

By

W. J. ROBERTS

(Author of "*The Love Story of Empress Josephine*," "*Literary Landmarks of Torquay*," *etc.*).

ILLUSTRATED FROM PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR, AND FROM CONTEMPORARY PICTURES.

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Dedication.

To

CONSTANCE, LADY RUSSELL,

of Swallowfield Park,

I Dedicate this Book as a slight token of Gratitude
For the Help and Encouragement she
has so graciously afforded me
in its Compilation.

W. J. ROBERTS

LONDON,
March, 1913.

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PREFACE

NO figure in the gallery of Early Victorian writers presents a character so charming or so tenderly pathetic as that of Mary Russell Mitford. Added to these characteristics is the fact that her life was, in reality, a tragedy brought about by her blind devotion and self-sacrifice to an object which we are forced to regard as altogether unworthy.

Miss Mitford's name is not a familiar one to this generation and it is with the desire to alter this that the following pages have been written. It would be impossible, within the compass of a book of this size, to show forth Miss Mitford's life in its entirety: what we have done has been to select from the records of her life and work such incidents and such friendships as seemed to us to portray her most faithfully. Whether we have succeeded must be left to the reader to judge.

In the compilation of the book many sources of information have been drawn upon and the author desires to acknowledge his indebtedness to all who have so kindly helped him in his labours. Chief among these has been Lady

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Russell of Swallowfield, who, in addition to supplying much material, has made the author still further indebted by her acceptance of the dedication of the book. Miss Rose G. Kingsley has also to be thanked for copies of letters written by Miss Mitford to her father, Charles Kingsley, who lies buried at Eversley, in the neighbourhood with which the book deals largely.

To Miss Josephine M. H. Fairless, Messrs. G. A. Poynder, W. Smith, T. Rowland Kent, H. T. Pugh, J. J. Cooper, J.P., and Alderman J. W. Martin (all of Reading) the author's best thanks are tendered, as also to the Rev. J. Henry Taylor, of Canterbury (Miss Mitford's "Little Henry"), the Rev. Alexander A. Headley, Rector of New Alresford, Mr. Bertram Dobell, the well-known bibliophile of London, Mr. W. H. Greenhough, Chief Librarian to the Borough of Reading, and W. H. Hudson, Esq.—the last named for his very kind loan of the pencil sketch of Miss Mitford which figures in this book.

W. J. ROBERTS.

London, 1913.

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CHAPTER I

EARLY DAYS IN ALRESFORD

WITHIN the stained but, happily, well-preserved registers of the Church of St. John the Baptist, New Alresford, Hampshire, is an entry which runs thus :—

> No. 211.
>
> George Midford of this parish, Batchelor, and Mary Russell of the same, Spinster. Married in this Church by Licence this Seventeenth day of October in the Year One Thousand Seven Hundred and Eighty-five by me, Will Buller,[1] Rector.
>
> This Marriage was solemnized between us { George Midford, Mary Russell.
>
> In the presence of { Jno. Harness, Elizabeth Anderson.

It is a prosaic enough entry and yet, as we shall endeavour to prove, it marked the beginning of a tragedy composed of the profligacy and wicked extravagance of one of its signa-

[1] Then also Dean of Exeter and, subsequently, Bishop of that Diocese.

tories, of the foolish, docile acquiescence of the other, and of the equally foolish and docile, but incomprehensible, infatuation for the profligate one which Mary Russell Mitford, the child of this union, made the guiding principle of her life.

George Midford—or Mitford, as he subsequently spelt his name—was the son of Francis Midford, Esq., of Hexham (descended from the ancient house of Midford,[1] of Midford Castle, near Morpeth), and of his wife Jane, formerly Miss Jane Graham, of Old Wall in Westmoreland, related to the Grahams of Netherby.

He was born at Hexham, November 15, 1760, received his early education at Newcastle School, studied for the profession of medicine at the University of Edinburgh, and was for three years a house pupil of the celebrated John Hunter, in London.

At the conclusion of his studies young Midford, or Mitford as we shall henceforth speak of him, went on a visit to a relative—Dr. Ogle, then Dean of Winchester—through whom he obtained an introduction to Miss Mary Russell, then living alone in the adjacent town of Alresford.

Mary Russell was an heiress—ten years the senior of George Mitford, being then in her thirty-sixth year—and just recovering from a recent bereavement in the death of her mother.

[1] Derived from the situation of the Castle keep, which lies between the fords of the river Wansbeck, Northumberland.

She was the daughter of Dr. Richard Russell, a lineal descendant of the ducal family of Bedford, Vicar of Overton and Rector of Ash—parishes adjoining each other and near to Whitchurch in Hampshire—who, as a widower, married Miss Dickers, the daughter of a Hampshire gentleman of considerable property, in the year 1745.

Childless by his first wife, the offspring of this second marriage was a son and two daughters.

Of these the son and elder daughter died in childhood, leaving Mary, who was born June 7, 1750, the sole heiress to the property of her parents.

Dr. Russell eventually resigned the Vicarage of Overton, but continued both his ministrations and residence at Ash, where he died in 1783, aged eighty-eight years.

At his death his widow and daughter—the latter then thirty-three years of age—removed to a pleasant and commodious house in the Broad Street of that old-world and peaceful township of Alresford, a town the houses of which, save the inns, bear no distinguishing name and number, the staid and sober life of whose inhabitants was only relieved by the mild excitements of market-day or by the noisy passage of the mail-coach as, with clatter of hoof-beats and blast of horn, it rattled gaily through, on its passage from London to Winchester or vice versa.

Mrs. Russell only survived her husband for

a little more than two years and died on March 8, 1785, leaving her daughter with a fortune of £28,000 in cash, in addition to house and land property. In the admirable introduction to *The Life and Letters of Mary Russell Mitford* (published 1870, and contributed by the Editor, the Rev. A. G. L'Estrange) we have a pen-portrait of Mary Russell at this period of her life which, in the absence of any other form of portraiture, we cannot do better than quote.

"In addition to these attractions [her inheritance] she had been carefully educated by her father; and to the ordinary accomplishments of gentlewomen in those days had united no slight acquaintance with the authors of Greece and Rome. She was kind-hearted, of mild and lady-like manners, of imperturbable temper, home-loving, and abounding in conversation, which flowed easily, in a soft and pleasant voice, from the sources of a full mind. Her figure was good, slight, active, and about the middle height; but the plainness of the face—the prominent eyes and teeth—the very bad complexion—was scarcely redeemed by the kind and cheerful expression which animated her countenance."

To this excessively plain but undoubtedly charming and accomplished woman was the young surgeon introduced, "being easily persuaded by friends more worldly wise than he to address himself to a lady who, although ten

years his senior, had every recommendation that heart could desire—except beauty."

She certainly had every recommendation that the heart of George Mitford could desire, for "though a very brief career of dissipation had reduced his pecuniary resources to the lowest ebb, he was not only recklessly extravagant, but addicted to high play."

A few months later they were married.

"She, full of confiding love, refused every settlement beyond two hundred a year pin-money, out of his own property, on which he insisted"—words written by Mary Russell Mitford, many years after, and which would contradict our statement of her father's pecuniary embarrassment, were they not discounted by the words of the Rev. William Harness, who, writing on the matter to a friend, says: "I hear that when Mitford was engaged to his wife she had a set of shirts made for him, lest it should be said that 'she had married a man without a shirt to his back!' Of course the story is not true; but it expressed what folk thought of his deplorable poverty and the impossibility of his making that settlement on her, for which my father was trustee, out of funds of his own, as Miss Mitford suggests."

And so they were married, the bride being given away by her trustee, Dr. John Harness, then living at Wickham, some few miles south of Alresford.

Had the confiding wife misgivings, we wonder? Or was it the excitement natural to such a momentous event in her life that caused the little hand to be so tremulous as it signed the nervous characters, Mary Russell, beneath the bold hand of her lord and master, on that eventful October 17, 1785?

Henceforth, had she but known, she would have need of all the comfort she might wring from those fatalistic words, "Che Sarà, Sarà," the motto of the Bedfords, whose ancestry she took such pride in claiming.

It had already been decided that Alresford should witness the commencement at least of the surgeon's professional career, and seeing that the house in Broad Street was commodious and, what was more to the point, well-furnished, there was no need to make a fresh home, and it was there they set up housekeeping together.

That the young man had good intentions is fairly evident, for he continued his studies and, in the course of a year or so, took his degree in medicine which permitted him to practise as a physician.

Thirteen months later a son was born to them, but did not survive. In the Baptismal Register of New Alresford Church is the entry :—

> "Francis Russell, son of George and Mary Midford, was privately baptized on the

12th, but died on the 23rd of November, 1786."

It is important that this entry should be placed on record, for while, in after years, Miss Mitford speaks of herself as the only survivor of three children, *two sons having died in infancy*, it has been stated in print that "Mary Russell Mitford was their only child." On the other hand, although careful search has been made, no record of the baptism or burial of a third child has been discovered in the Alresford registers, and we can only assume, therefore, that this child must have died at birth and on a date subsequent to that of his sister.

Sufficient for us, however, is the entry in these same registers :—

"Mary Russell, daughter of George and Mary Midford, baptized February 29, 1788"—

the child having been born on December 16, 1787.

Of these early days we have, fortunately, a picture left by the child herself. "A pleasant home, in truth, it was," she writes. "A large house in a little town of the north of Hampshire—a town, so small, that but for an ancient market, very slenderly attended, nobody would have dreamt of calling it anything but a village.[1]

[1] Many years afterwards, when appointed to the See of Winchester, the late Bishop Thorold alluded to it as one of a number of Town-Villages which he said he found so peculiarly distinctive a feature of Hampshire.

The breakfast room, where I first possessed myself of my beloved ballads, was a lofty and spacious apartment, literally lined with books, which, with its Turkey carpet, its glowing fire, its sofas, and its easy chairs, seemed, what indeed it was, a very nest of English comfort. The windows opened on a large old-fashioned garden, full of old-fashioned flowers, stocks, roses, honeysuckles and pinks; and that again led into a grassy orchard, abounding with fruit-trees. What a playground was that orchard! and what playfellows were mine! Nancy [her maid], with her trim prettiness, my own dear father, handsomest and cheerfullest of men, and the great Newfoundland dog, Coe, who used to lie down at my feet, as if to invite me to mount him, and then to prance off with his burthen, as if he enjoyed the fun as much as we did. Most undoubtedly I was a spoilt child. When I recollect certain passages of my thrice-happy early life, I cannot have the slightest doubt about the matter, although it contradicts all foregone conclusions, all nursery and schoolroom morality, to say so. But facts are stubborn things. Spoilt I was. Everybody spoilt me—most of all the person whose power in that way was greatest: the dear papa himself. Not content with spoiling me indoors, he spoilt me out. How well I remember his carrying me round the orchard on his shoulder, holding fast my little three-year-old feet, whilst the little hands hung on to his pig-tail, which I

called my bridle (those were days of pig-tails), hung so fast, and tugged so heartily, that sometimes the ribbon would come off between my fingers, and send his hair floating and the powder flying down his back. That climax of mischief was the crowning joy of all. I can hear our shouts of laughter now."

A pretty picture this, and one to which, as she wrote of it, the tired old woman looked back as on one of the few oases in a life which, despite certain successes, was nothing short of a desert of weariness and of struggle with poverty.

But apart from this boisterous love of play, the little girl early developed a passion for reading, fostered and encouraged, no doubt, by that "grave home-loving mother," who "never in her life read any book but devotion," in whose room, indeed, it was matter for astonished comment to find the works of Spenser.

At the age of three, little Mary showed a remarkable precocity of intellect, and even before she had reached that early age her father was accustomed to perch her on the breakfast-table to exhibit her one accomplishment to admiring guests, "who admired all the more, because, a small puny child, looking far younger than I really was, nicely dressed, as only children generally are, and gifted with an affluence of curls, I might have passed for the twin sister of my own great doll."

On such occasions she would be given one or

other of the Whig newspapers of the day—the *Courier* or *Morning Chronicle*—and, to the delight of her father and the wonder of the guests, would prattle forth the high-seasoned political pronouncements with which those journals were filled.

Following this display there was, of course, reward; not with sweetmeats, however, "too plentiful in my case to be very greatly cared for," but by the reading of the "Children in the Wood" by mother from *Percy's Reliques*, "and I looked for my favourite ballad after every performance, just as the piping bullfinch that hung in the window looked for his lump of sugar after going through 'God save the King.' The two cases were exactly parallel."

But one day "the dear mamma" was absent and could not administer the customary reward, with the result that papa had to read the "Children in the Wood," though not before he had searched the shelves to find the, to him, unfamiliar volumes. Following which search and labour he was easily constrained by the petted child to hand over the book to Nancy, that she might read extracts whenever called upon. And when Nancy, as was inevitable, waxed weary of the "Children in the Wood," she gradually took to reading other of the ballads; "and as from three years old I grew to be four or five, I learned to read them myself, and the book became the delight of my childhood, as it is now the solace of my age."

Mary Russell Mitford at the age of three.
(From a Miniature.)

With a child so apt it is not surprising that we find no record of a governess or tutor during these early years—that is, so far as general education was concerned; but there was one item of special education which the fond papa did insist upon, an insistence which was the cause of much grief to and some disobedience from the spoilt girl.

"How my father, who certainly never knew the tune of 'God save the King' from that of the other national air, 'Rule, Britannia,' came to take into his head so strong a fancy to make me an accomplished musician I could never rightly understand, but that such a fancy did possess him I found to my sorrow! From the day I was five years old, he stuck me up to the piano, and, although teacher after teacher had discovered that I had neither ear, nor taste, nor application, he continued, fully bent upon my learning it."

Nevertheless, she did not learn it and, as we shall see later, this fixed idea of her father's gave place to another equally futile.

Chief of her playmates at this time was William Harness, the son of her mother's trustee. He would be brought over from Wickham in the morning, and after a day of romps, be taken back in his father's carriage late in the afternoon. Although two years the junior of Mary, William was her constant and boon companion, and remained to be her friend and counsellor through

life, although his counsels were, at times, very wilfully disregarded.

Mutually genial of temperament, they sympathized with each other's tastes and pursuits, particularly as these related to Literature and the Drama. On one point only did they disagree, and its subject was "dear papa." By a sort of intuition the boy must have, even in those early days, come to regard the handsome, bluff, genial, loud-voiced surgeon with something akin to suspicion, a suspicion which was maintained and fully justified in the years to come.

CHAPTER II

LYME REGIS AND TRAGEDY'S SHADOW

THE picture, given us by Miss Mitford herself, of those early days in the Hampshire home, is one from the contemplation of which we are loth to drag ourselves.

Again and again in her *Recollections* we note how the memory was drawn upon to conjure up some pleasant scene from the past. Of the town itself her vision is of "a picturesque country church with yews and lindens on one side, and beyond, a down as smooth as velvet, dotted with rich islands of coppice, hazel, woodbine, hawthorn and holly reaching up into the young oaks, and overhanging flowery patches of primroses, wood-sorrel, wild hyacinths, and wild strawberries. On the side opposite the church in a hollow fringed with alders and bulrushes, gleamed the bright clear lakelet, radiant with swans and water-lilies, which the simple townsfolk were content to call the Great Pond."

Fortunately for us the hand of Time has touched this old town gently. It is true the picturesque country church has, by sheer force

of decay begotten of a hoary antiquity, given place to one not less picturesque on the old site; but the peaceful aspect of the streets and inns remains, together with that commodious house in the Broad Street which, excepting one slight internal alteration, differs in nothing from the house which Miss Mitford knew in her childhood, the place of her birth.

With steep-pitched roof and painted front, its old dormer-windows look out with a certain grave dignity befitting the windows of a house which enshrines such a tender memory, on the town "through whose streets streamed Cavaliers and Roundheads after the battle of Cheriton," on the downs where, a full hundred and twenty years ago, the little mistress was wont fearlessly to ride on her father's favourite blood-mare, seated on a specially-contrived pad and enclosed so fondly by that same father's strong and loving arm.

Specially privileged and greatly esteeming the privilege, we have wandered through the rooms of this house; seen the breakfast-room round which were ranged the books of Grandpa Russell's library; seen the curiously contrived sash-window—the like of which we have never seen in any house before or since—fashioned so cunningly that its entire height slides upward into a recess quite out of sight; stepped through the opening thus made on to the flagged path-way leading by quaint outbuildings and stable

to the garden and orchard beyond, where, as we have already noted, took place those dashing rides on a human mount, with a powdered, beribboned pigtail in lieu of reins.

Small wonder is it that we looked on these things with something akin to reverence, and certainly with pity in our heart as we recalled how shamefully those idyllic days were to end.

With a strong preference for country sports and occupations, with a gay and careless temper which all the professional etiquette of the world could never tame into the staid gravity proper to a doctor of medicine, and with that insidious canker, the love of gambling, slowly devouring any manliness he may have possessed, Dr. Mitford gradually frittered away the whole of his wife's fortune, save a matter of £3,500 in the funds, which, being in the hands of trustees, was beyond his reach. Generous to a degree, and with a blind confidence and belief in her husband's affection, Mrs. Mitford would not permit any part of her property to be settled on herself, and was therefore, to some extent, to blame for the catastrophe which followed.

Thus, in a few short years of married life—at the most nine—we find this professional man forced to sell furniture and portions of his library in order to meet current expenses and ease the clamours of his creditors; forced, indeed, from very shame, to quit the self-contained and therefore intolerant town where bitter tongues were

wagging and scornful fingers pointing, and to take up a residence in a distant seaside town, where, if he ever hoped to retrench and reform, and had he but given the matter a moment's consideration, he was scarcely likely to achieve his object.

It was to Lyme Regis they went—this unduly optimistic, noisy, sportsman-practitioner, with his uncomplaining still trustful wife and their six-year-old daughter, wide-eyed and wondering why this sudden flight. The true import of this removal was not to be hidden from this remarkably intuitive child. "In that old, historical town," she writes in one of her reminiscent moods, "that old town so finely placed on the very line where Dorsetshire and Devonshire meet, I spent the eventful year when the careless happiness of childhood vanished, and the troubles of the world first dimly dawned upon my heart —felt in its effects rather than known—felt in its chilling gloom, as we feel the shadow of a cloud that passes over the sun on an April day." Strangely-sad words these, expressing the thoughts of a child at an age when, not strong enough to help and too young to be confided in, it can do nothing but mark the change, questioning the mother's furtive tear while, rendered more sensitive by reason of its own impotence, it shudders in the cold atmosphere of vague yet ill-concealed suspicion and mistrust.

Yet, mark the improvidence of this unstable

man; the house he took in Lyme Regis was, "as commonly happens to people whose fortunes are declining, far more splendid than that we had inhabited, indeed the very best in the town."

The house still stands with its "great extent of frontage, terminating by large gates surmounted by spread eagles." It is now known as "The Retreat," and is in the Broad Street of Lyme, proudly pointed to by the inhabitants as the house once rented by the great Lord Chatham for the benefit of his son's—William Pitt's—health, and, twenty years later, by the Mitford family.

Lyme Regis is the embodiment of much that is interesting, historically and politically, but particularly to us by reason of its literary associations. Of "The Retreat" we have, fortunately, a description written by Miss Mitford herself.

"An old stone porch, with benches on either side, projected from the centre, covered as was the whole front of the house, with tall, spreading, wide-leaved myrtle, abounding in blossom, with moss-roses, jessamine, and passion-flowers. Behind the building, extended round a paved quadrangle, was the drawing-room, a splendid apartment, looking upon a little lawn surrounded by choice evergreens, the bay, the cedar and the arbutus, and terminated by an old-fashioned greenhouse and a filbert-tree walk. In the steep declivity of the central garden was a grotto, over-arching a cool, sparkling spring, whilst the

slopes on either side were carpeted with strawberries and dotted with fruit trees. One drooping medlar, beneath whose branches I have often hidden, I remember well."

This great house, with its large and lofty rooms, its noble oaken staircases, its marble hall, long galleries and corridors, was scarcely the house which a man anxious to mark time in an unpretentious fashion was likely to choose. Nor, had he stopped for one moment to consider, would he have chosen Lyme Regis as a retreat, for it was then practically at the height of its fashionable prosperity, with its gay Assembly Rooms, the resort of those on whom Bath and Brighthelmstone were beginning to pall, and who were henceforth to divide their patronage between this Dorsetshire rendezvous and that other, just awakened, resort still further westward round the coast and destined, in the slow course of a century, to become the imperiously aristocratic Torquay.

No, indeed! this was no move the wisdom of which was calculated to inspire in the breast of Harness, the trustee, any restoration of confidence, for those long galleries and corridors were, quite naturally, "echoing from morning to night with gay visitors, cousins from the North, and the ever-shifting company of the watering-place."

It was a strange place wherein a laughter-loving child should be sad. "Yet sad I was," she says.

"Nobody told me, but I felt, I knew, I had an interior conviction, for which I could not have accounted, that, in the midst of all this natural beauty and apparent happiness, in spite of the company, in spite of the gaiety, something was wrong. It was such a foreshowing as makes the quicksilver in the barometer sink whilst the weather is still bright and clear."

How pitiful it all seems! how strangely pathetic when, side by side with that description of the insistent shadow, we set the written indictment of him who was the cause of all the trouble —pathetic because, though an indictment, it is done so gently and breathes the very spirit of forgiveness.

"Then . . . he attempted to increase his resources by the aid of cards, (he was, unluckily, one of the finest whist-players in England), or by that other terrible gambling, which assumes so many forms, and bears so many names, but which even when called by its milder term of *Speculation*, is that terrible thing gambling still; whatever might be the manner of the loss—or whether, as afterwards happened, his own large-hearted hospitality and too-confiding temper were alone to blame—for the detail was never known to me, nor do I think it was known to my mother; he did not tell and we could not ask. How often, in after-life, has that sanguine spirit, which clung to him to his last hour, made me tremble and shiver."

Herein, perhaps, we may divine the reason for the otherwise incomprehensible move from Alresford, where the cost of living would be cheap [1] as compared with the high prices obtaining at fashionable Lyme! Nevertheless, although the influence of the brooding shadow was insistent, these days at Lyme Regis were not without their excitement and pleasures.

"One incident that occurred there—a frightful danger—a providential escape—I shall never forget," says Miss Mitford in her *Recollections*.

A ball at the Rooms was about to take place, and a party of sixteen or more persons dressed for it had assembled in the Mitford dining-room for dessert, when suddenly the heavy plaster ornamentation of the ceiling crashed down in large masses upon the folk seated beneath. Fortunately the only damage was to the flowers and feathers of the ladies, the crystal and china, and the fruits and wines of the dessert, together with a few scratches on the bald head of a venerable clergyman.

"I, myself," she continues, "caught instantly in my father's arms, by whose side I was standing, had scarcely even time to be frightened, although

[1] The only two entries in the rate-books of Alresford, relating to payments made by "George Mitford—Surgeon," are, under an assessment at 9*d.* in the pound, made in 1787—7*s.*; and, under an assessment at 4½*d.* in the pound, made in 1790—5*s.*

after the danger was over, our fair visitors of course began to scream."

But it was in the planning and carrying out of excursions in the neighbourhood that Dr. Mitford showed to greater advantage, giving full play to those characteristics which, as opposed to his general selfishness, endeared him then and always to children. Hand in hand with his little daughter, vivacious and inquiring, the two would sally forth in quest of glittering spars and ores, of curious shells and seaweeds and of the fossils which abounded in the Bay, the collection to be finally carried home and laid out in a certain dark panelled chamber which, after the book-room, was the most favoured spot in all the house to the little girl.

Sometimes these excursions would take them towards Charmouth, at others to the Pinny cliffs, where, "about a mile and a half from the town, an old landslip had deposited a farm-house, with its outbuildings, its garden, and its orchard, tossed half-way down amongst the rocks, contrasting so strangely its rich and blossoming vegetation, its look of home and comfort, with the dark rugged masses above, below and around."

At other times they would pace together that quaint old pier, the Cob, or ascend the hill to Up-Lyme, whence they might watch the waves swirling in sheets of green and spumey white in the Bay below.

Very happy, on such occasions, was the child,

although the indefinable shadow dogged her, now vague, now portentous.

At last, and little more than a twelvemonth after their removal to Lyme, there was a hurried flitting, following short and stormy interviews with landlords, lawyers and others.

One fateful night "two or three large chests were carried away through the garden by George and another old servant." Everything was to be sold so that everybody might be paid. Save a few special favourites among the books, the library was left for disposal by auction, and a day or two after, Mrs. Mitford and the child, with Mrs. Mosse, the housekeeper and a maid-servant, left Lyme and its shadow for London and a shadow of more sinister bearing.

Dr. Mitford had gone before, leaving the little party to travel post in a hack chaise. The journey was full of discomfort to the distressed women. At Dorchester, where they had hoped to stay the night, they found the town so full of soldiers, breaking camp, that there was no accommodation for them, nor was there chaise or horses wherewith to pursue the journey. Finally, after searching all over the place, they were able to obtain a lift in a rough tilted cart without springs which bumped and jolted them over eight rough miles to a small place whence they might hope to proceed in the morning.

"It was my mother's first touch of poverty; it seemed like a final parting from all the ele-

gances and all the accommodations to which she had been used. I never shall forget her heart-broken look when she took her little girl upon her lap in that jolting caravan, nor how the tears stood in her eyes when we were turned altogether into our miserable bed-room when we reached the roadside ale-house where we were to pass the night, and found ourselves, instead of the tea we so much needed, condemned to sup on stale bread and cheese."

The next day they resumed their journey, and at length reached a dingy comfortless lodging on the Surrey side of Blackfriars Bridge, where, with the cause of all the trouble, they found a refuge from pressing creditors within the rules of the King's Bench. Here, like a certain historic figure whose exploits were to be inimitably recorded later, Dr. Mitford waited for something to turn up, beguiling the time by visits to Guy's Hospital, where his friend and fellow-pupil, Dr. Babington, was one of the physicians, and by performing odd jobs for, and being generally useful to the notorious "Dr. Graham"—a famous quack who throve amazingly at the expense of a gullible and doubtless sensually-minded public.[1]

[1] Dr. Graham's "Celestial Bed" for sterile couples is numbered among the astounding frauds of the early nineteenth century. To his "Temple"—first in the Adelphi and later, as he grew wealthy and more daring, to Schomberg House in Pall Mall—there thronged a heterogeneous mass

With her fortune gone and with only the tattered but eloquent remnants of respectability left to her, can we wonder that the educated and refined daughter of an eminent divine should wear a heart-broken look and weep bitter tears? Her spirit was broken, and even Hope seemed to have deserted her!

of people, some taking him and his nostrums seriously, while others—the bulk, it is suggested—paid large sums for admission to view Emma Lyon, afterwards Lady Hamilton, pose, in scant drapery, as the Goddess of Hygiene. Not the least of this charlatan's astounding achievements are his obscene and blasphemous pamphlets on the most delicate subjects, which he circulated broadcast among the class to which he knew they would appeal.

CHAPTER III

READING AND SCHOOL DAYS AT CHELSEA

DR. MITFORD'S spirit was a sanguine one; he could not believe that Dame Fortune intended to frown on him and his for ever. With much to commend it in a general way, the possession of such a spirit may yet be a menace, a positive danger. To a man of Dr. Mitford's character it was a danger. It led him into the rashest of speculations; it launched him upon the wildest of wild schemes and left him, nearly always, a loser.

On one occasion, however, Fortune smiled on him in so dramatic a fashion that thereafter his belief in himself could never be shaken.

It happened some long time after the family had been settled in the dingy London apartments and, in accordance with his usual practice, the Doctor had taken his little daughter to walk about London—a never-failing source of delight to her, both then and in later life.

"One day"—her own description of the event is so expressive and circumstantial—"he took me into a not very tempting-looking place,

which was, as I speedily found, a lottery-office. It was my birthday, and I was ten years old. An Irish lottery was upon the point of being drawn, and he desired me to choose one out of several bits of printed paper (I did not then know their significance) that lay upon the counter.

"'Choose which number you like best,' said the dear papa, 'and that shall be your birthday present.'

"I immediately selected one, and put it into his hand; No. 2,224.

"'Ah!' said my father, examining it, 'you must choose again. I want to buy a whole ticket; and this is only a quarter. Choose again, my pet.'

"'No, dear papa, I like this one best.'

"'Here is the next number,' interposed the lottery-office keeper, 'No. 2,223.'

"'Ay,' said my father, 'that will do just as well. Will it not, Mary? We'll take that.'

"'No!' returned I obstinately; 'that won't do. This is my birthday, you know, papa, and I am ten years old. Cast up *my* number, and you'll find that makes ten. The other is only nine.'

"My father, superstitious like all speculators, struck with my pertinacity and with the reason I gave, which he liked none the less because the ground of preference was tolerably unreasonable, resisted the attempt of the office-keeper to tempt me by different tickets, and we had

nearly left the shop without a purchase, when the clerk, who had been examining different desks and drawers, said to his principal :—

" ' I think, sir, the matter may be managed if the gentleman does not mind paying a few shillings more. That ticket, 2,224, only came yesterday, and we have still all the shares : one half, one quarter, one eighth, two sixteenths. It will be just the same if the young lady is set upon it.'

" The young lady was set upon it, and the shares were purchased.

" ' The whole affair was a secret between us, and my father, whenever he got me to himself, talked over our future twenty thousand pounds—just like Alnaschar over his basket of eggs.

" Meanwhile time passed on, and one Sunday morning a face that I had forgotten, but my father had not, made its appearance. It was the clerk of the lottery-office. An express had just arrived from Dublin, announcing that No. 2,224 had been drawn a prize of twenty thousand pounds, and he had hastened to communicate the good news."

Twenty thousand pounds ! Dame Fortune was indeed rewarding the optimist. Dr. Mitford was nothing if not magnanimous, and although he had presented the lottery ticket as a birthday present to his daughter, and although it was due to her persistence only that the winning number, 2,224, had been chosen, he at once claimed the

success as his own, and, when informing his friends, added that he should settle the whole amount on his daughter.

No trace of any such settlement can be discovered; if it was made it was speedily annulled and in the course of a very few years it had been all squandered in the Doctor's own reckless fashion.

"Ah, me!" reflects Miss Mitford. "In less than twenty years what was left of the produce of the ticket so strangely chosen? What? except a Wedgwood dinner-service that my father had made to commemorate the event with the Irish harp within the border on one side, and his family crest on the other!"

The infinite possibilities of twenty thousand pounds were not lost on the Doctor. Forthwith he moved with his wife, child and few belongings to Reading, then a fairly prosperous and eminnently respectable town, swarming "with single ladies of that despised denomination which is commonly known by the title of old maids."

At the period of which we are now writing its commerce was practically confined to trading in the products of the rural districts surrounding it—principally in malt, corn and flour. Being on the direct coach-road from London to the West of England, it was, naturally, a great and important centre for the carrying trade, as witness whereof the many quaint old inns still standing. An air of prosperity pervaded the

streets, for the ancient borough was just beginning to rouse itself from the lethargy into which it had drifted when its staple trade, the manufacture of cloth, dwindled and died scarcely a century before.

"Clean, airy, orderly and affluent; well paved, well lighted, well watched; abounding in wide and spacious streets, filled with excellent shops and handsome houses," is Miss Mitford's description of it, and she might have added that it was once again comporting itself in the grand manner as was proper to a town whose origin is lost in the mists of antiquity, but whose records, from the twelfth century at least, are records of great doings of both Church and State.

In Miss Mitford's day there were still many picturesque examples of fifteenth-century domestic architecture bordering the streets, while the ruined magnificence of the Great Abbey, with its regal tomb of Henry I before the High Altar, lent it a touch of dignity the like of which few other provincial towns could assume.

The move from London to Reading took place in 1797, and the house they inhabited was a new and handsome red-brick structure on the London Road, fortunately still standing, and now known as "Kendrick View." Here, with his phaeton, his spaniels and greyhounds, Dr. Mitford proceeded to enjoy himself with, apparently, no regard whatever for the future. The swarms of old maids excelled in arranging card-

parties to which, by inviting the wives, they managed to secure the presence and company of the husbands. At these parties the Doctor was an ever-welcome guest, for, as we have already noted, he was one of the finest whist-players of his time. Everything he did was performed on a lavish scale. His greyhounds, for instance, were the best that money could procure—no coursing meeting either in the neighbourhood or the country for many miles round was considered complete unless the Mitford kennel was represented, nor, as the Doctor was impatient of defeat, did he consider the meeting a success unless the Mitford kennel carried all before it.

Meanwhile, and when not engaged in the mild excitements of cribbage and quadrille, Mrs. Mitford paced the garden at the rear of the house, "in contented, or at least uncomplaining, solitude," for even now, she could never be certain whether, at any moment, the hazardous life her husband was leading might not plunge them once again into a miserable poverty; "a complaining woman uncomplaining."

Their daughter's education now became a matter of moment, for she was in her eleventh year. Accordingly, she was entered as a boarder at the school kept by M. St. Quintin, a French *émigré*, at 22, Hans Place, Sloane Street, then almost surrounded by fields, and even now, although much altered, a pleasant enough situation.

"Kendrick View," Reading, where the Mitfords lived, 1797–1805

M. St. Quintin and his wife enjoyed a reputation of no ordinary character, and before venturing on the Hans Place establishment had built up a good connection and secured an equally good name, in the conduct of the Abbey School at Reading in a house adjoining what is known to have been the Inner Gateway of the famous Abbey. In this Abbey School—though not under the tuition of Monsieur and Madame St. Quintin—Jane Austen received much of her education, as did also another famous author, Mrs. Sherwood.

Their reputation in Reading was, doubtless, the deciding factor in favour of sending Mary Mitford to them in London, and that the decision was a happy one there can be no question.

Little Mary, from her very early years, had not enjoyed the best of health. As is common with precocious children, she was somewhat scrofulous; coupled with this she was further disadvantaged by being short and fat. Nor was she pretty. Her portrait, painted when she was three years old, while it depicts an intelligent face, shows nothing of the beauty usual in children of that age. On the other hand, we have it on the authority of those who knew her well, that whatever defects of form and feature she may have suffered were amply compensated by the winsome smile, the gentle temper, keen appreciation of life and all it had to give, and by the silver-toned voice, all of which endeared

her to those who came under the spell of her personality.

She was essentially the child of her parents, combining the quiet acquiescent nature of her mother with all the optimistic characteristics of her father; and although, happily, she never gave evidence of emulating her father in his selfishness or those other worse attributes of character which he sometimes displayed, the fact has to be recorded that, occasionally, here and there, among the originals of her letters to her father is to be detected a certain coarseness of thought and expression which go to prove that even she was not altogether proof against the influence of this unwise parent.

Monsieur St. Quintin's establishment was well calculated to interest the observant child, and of her schoolmaster and his associates she has given us an amusing and picturesque description.

"He had been secretary to the Comte de Moustiers, one of the last Ambassadors, if not the very last, from Louis Seize to the Court of St. James's. Of course he knew many emigrants of the highest rank, and, indeed, of all ranks; and being a lively, kind-hearted man, with a liberal hand and a social temper, it was his delight to assemble as many as he could of his poor countrymen and countrywomen around his hospitable supper-table. Something wonderful and admirable it was to see how these Dukes and Duchesses, Marshals and Marquises, Chevaliers

and Bishops, bore up under their unparalleled reverses! How they laughed and talked, and squabbled, and flirted,—constant to their high heels, their rouge, and their furbelows, to their old liaisons, their polished sarcasms, their cherished rivalries! For the most part, these noble exiles had a trifling pecuniary dependency; some had brought with them jewels enough to sustain them in their simple lodgings in Knightsbridge or Pentonville; to some a faithful steward contrived to forward the produce of some estate, too small to have been seized by the early plunderers; to others a rich English friend would claim the privilege of returning the kindness and hospitality of by-gone years."

Many of them eked out a precarious living by teaching languages, fencing, dancing and music; while some, like Monsieur St. Quintin, were fortunate in being able to found and carry on an educational establishment on a somewhat large scale.

Although shy and awkward, home-sick and lonely, little Mary soon found much in the Hans Place establishment to interest and amuse her. Like all other similar establishments, it contained an element of exclusiveness fostered by the snobbish half-dozen great girls who, being "only gentlemen's daughters, had no earthly right to give themselves airs." These the little country girl did not take seriously enough to give her cause for trouble. But she

noticed them, nevertheless, and watched with youthful contempt their successful attempts to ostracize other less-favoured girls than themselves. Her memories of such incidents are epitomized very charmingly in her *Recollections*, wherein she records the pathetic story of Mademoiselle Rose, and the triumph over her tormentors of the neglected, snubbed and shy poor Betsy. It reads almost like a "moral tale," but is saved from the general mediocrity of such effusions by its honest ring of indignation, of sweet girlish sympathy with the suffering of her fellow-pupil and governess, and of denunciation of the thoughtless ones.

Mademoiselle Rose was the granddaughter of an aged couple among the *émigrés* who gathered at Madame St. Quintin's supper parties. They bore noted names of Brittany and had possessed large estates, but now having lost these and their two sons and been driven from their country, they were dependent on the charity of others, and on what their granddaughter Rose could earn by straw-plaiting to make into the fancy bonnets then in vogue. Mademoiselle Rose deserves to live in our minds, she was so brave. "Rose!" says Miss Mitford; "what a name for that pallid drooping creature, whose dark eyes looked too large for her face, whose bones seemed starting through her skin, and whose black hair contrasted even fearfully with the wan complexion from which every tinge of healthful colour had

flown!" Even when she accompanied her grandparents to the supper parties she always brought her work, and rarely put it down during the whole evening, so ceaseless was the toil by which she laboured to support the aged couple now cast upon her duty and her affection.

At length it became necessary to find some other means of income apart from the straw-plaiting, and so Mademoiselle Rose was installed as a governess in the St. Quintin establishment, "working as indefatigably through our verbs and over our exercises as she had before done through the rattle of the tric-trac [1] table and the ceaseless chatter of French talk," now and again putting in a word for her straw-plaits which in these new circumstances had to be made during a scanty leisure, and her insistent desire for the sale of which she made no effort to conceal.

At this juncture arrived Betsy, a child of nine, the daughter of a cheese-merchant in the Borough, and therefore considered as fair game by the vulgar and vain daughters of gentlemen. She came with her father, who although he stayed but five minutes, was so typical a John Bull in voice and bearing that the elegant French dancing-master who received him shrugged himself almost out of his clothes with ill-concealed disgust. "I rather liked the man," says Miss Mitford;

[1] A game resembling backgammon.

" there was so much character about him, and, in spite of the coarseness, so much that was bold and hearty."

The disgust of the dancing-master was not lost upon him, for his parting injunction to the mistress of the establishment was " to take care that no grinning Frenchman had the ordering of his Betsy's feet. If she must learn to dance, let her be taught by an honest Englishman."

The conduct of both parent and dancing-master was a cue indeed for the gentlemen's daughters, of which they quickly took advantage, to the great discomfort of poor Betsy, who, discarding Mary Mitford's advances, sought and found silent comfort with Mademoiselle Rose. It was only silent comfort she obtained, the comfort of suffering souls in sympathy with each other, for neither knew the other's language, and the only solace they obtained was in working together over the straw-plaits, in which Betsy quickly became adept. By some means the child was made aware of Mademoiselle Rose's story, which had then become more poignant by reason of the fact that, although an opportunity had presented itself, by arrangement with the First Consul, for the re-admission of her grandparents to France and possibly for the ultimate recovery of some of their property, it could not be grasped, as they were all too poor to bear the expense. So poor Rose sighed over her straw-plaits, and submitted. Shortly afterwards Betsy

was summoned home and begged permission to take one of Rose's bonnets to show her aunt, with a view to purchase, a request which was granted. Two hours later Betsy reappeared in the schoolroom together with her father. The scene which ensued must be told in Miss Mitford's own words.

"'Ma'amselle,' said he, bawling as loud as he could, with the view, as we afterwards conjectured, of making her understand him—'Ma'amselle, I have no great love for the French, whom I take to be our natural enemies. But you're a good young woman; you've been kind to my Betsy, and have taught her how to make your fallals; and, moreover, you're a good daughter, and so's my Betsy. She says that she thinks you're fretting because you can't manage to take your grandfather and grandmother back to France again; so, as you let her help you in that other handiwork, why you must let her help you in this.' Then throwing a heavy purse into her lap, catching his little daughter up in his arms, and hugging her to the honest breast where she hid her tears and her blushes, he departed, leaving poor Mdlle. Rose too much bewildered to speak, or to comprehend the happiness that had fallen upon her, and the whole school the better for the lesson."

CHAPTER IV

SCHOOLDAYS AND MISS ROWDEN'S INFLUENCE

IN both the conduct of his establishment and its curriculum, M. St. Quintin was very thorough, and no doubt it was to this quality that he owed the large measure of his success as a schoolmaster. He himself taught the pupils French, history, geography, and a smattering of science, the scope of which was limited for the very obvious reason that the tutor knew little of the subject. He was ably seconded by Miss Rowden, the Fanny Rowden who subsequently endeared herself greatly to her precocious pupil and, in course of time, succeeded M. St. Quintin, upon his retirement, as mistress of the school. She was responsible for the general course of study, being assisted by special finishing masters for Italian, music, dancing and drawing. In all of these, save that of music, Mary Mitford became a proficient pupil, so proficient indeed that she often nonplussed her teachers by her intelligent questionings.

"Our treasure," wrote Mrs. Mitford to her husband whilst she was on a short visit to the

school, " was much amused yesterday morning. In her astronomical lecture, she not only completely posed Miss Rowden, but M. St. Quintin himself could not reconcile a contradiction which she had discovered in the author they were perusing. You cannot have an idea of the gratification the dear little rogue feels in puzzling her instructors."

In the month previous to this she had again successfully carried the day against her tutor in an English composition of which the subject was " The Advantage of a Well-educated Mind." In examining this M. St. Quintin observed a word which struck him as needless, and he was about to erase it when the pupil in her pretty, meek way, an artless manner of which she seems to have made good use in her childhood, urged that it should be left standing. The tutor was immediately perplexed and appealed to Miss Rowden, who gave judgment in favour of the pupil, suggesting that in the event of the disputed participle being dismissed, the whole sentence would need complete alteration. On a more deliberate view of the subject, St. Quintin agreed to the retention of the word and " with all the liberality which is so amiable a point in his character, begged our daughter's pardon," wrote the proud mother.

The year 1802 found her the winner of the prize for both French and English composition, and so keen was her desire for knowledge that

two months later she wrote home to her mother the information : " I have just taken a lesson in Latin ; but I shall, in consequence, omit some of my other business. It is so extremely like Italian, that I think I shall find it much easier than I expected." For this, Miss Rowden was immediately responsible, so emulous was the child of her governess ; indeed, Miss Rowden's influence on the little girl was undoubtedly far-reaching and must have laid the foundation of all her love for literature which was so marked a characteristic of Miss Mitford's life. Truly, Miss Rowden had in the child a wonderfully receptive soil in which to plant the seeds of learning—we must not forget the early precocious years and their association with *Percy's Reliques* and kindred mental exercises—but she was a wise woman, and fostered and encouraged her pupil to an extent which would demand a tribute of praise from the most superficial historian of Miss Mitford's life. The fact that Miss Rowden was at this time diligently reading Virgil was sufficient stimulus to her pupil to study to the same end, hence the letter home announcing her decision. On this occasion it would appear that Mrs. Mitford entertained a doubt as to the wisdom of the proposal, and consulted her husband, with the result that a letter on the subject was forthwith despatched to Hans Place.

" Your mother and myself," wrote the Doctor, " have had much conversation concerning the

utility of your learning Latin, and we both agree that it is perfectly unnecessary, and would occasion you additional trouble. It would occupy more of your time than you could conveniently appropriate to it; and we are more than satisfied with your application and proficiency in everything."

In this, as in most other matters at this period of her life, the child had her own way, and the Latin lessons were continued—advantageously, as the sequel will show.

On the whole, her life at Hans Place was of the happiest, although, of course, the early days were touched with the miseries of home-sickness which are the common lot of all children in similar circumstances.

"I was scarcely less happy," she wrote in the after years, "in the great London school than at home; to tell the truth, I was well nigh as much spoilt in one place as in the other; but as I was a quiet and orderly little girl, and fell easily into the rules of the house, there was no great harm done, either to me or to the school discipline."

Nevertheless, there is a lonely touch in one of her early letters home from Hans Place. It is dated September 15, 1799, and after thanking the dear papa for certain parcels just received, goes on to state: "My uncle called on me twice while he stayed in London, but he went away in five minutes both times. He said that he only

went to fetch my aunt, and would certainly take me out when he returned. I hope that I may be wrong in my opinion of my aunt; but I again repeat, I think she has the most hypocritical drawl I have ever heard. Pray, my dearest papa, come soon to see me. I am quite miserable without you, and have a thousand things to say to you."

A year later—November 30, 1800—she wrote exuberantly in her pocket book: "Where shall I be this day month? At home! How happy I shall be, and shall be ready to jump out of my skin for joy."

Of her inability to master music, due to her absolute lack of taste for it, we have already spoken. Her first attempts were made on the piano at the age of five, and so determined was her father in the matter that, waiving all objections, he insisted on her continuing to practise right up to the date of her removal to the school in Hans Place and for some years after.

The music-master at Hans Place was Mr. Hook, the father of Theodore Hook, and a composer of songs for the Vauxhall Gardens. He was, so we learn, an instructor of average ability, smooth-faced, good-natured and kindly, but although these commended him to Miss Mitford they aroused no enthusiasm in her for his art. So he, like many others who had preceded him in the thankless task of trying to teach little Mary her notes, was promptly told by the

hasty father—who, unlike his daughter, was not struck by Mr. Hook's appearance or manner—that he was no good and must be replaced by some one more competent. This some one promptly appeared in the person of Herr Schuberl, at that time engaged in the special tuition of two of Mary's schoolfellows. He was an impatient, irritable, but undoubtedly able man, and before long amply avenged Mr. Hook, by refusing to have anything more to do with the impossible pupil.

This dismissal was, of course, hailed by the child with great glee, for she began to entertain the hope that the incident would put a stop for ever to the attempts being made in regard to her musical education. But her joy was short-lived; her father was too pertinacious to be so easily turned from his purpose, and believing that the failure of his child was due to incompetent teachers and to his own choice of instrument, he decreed that she must learn the harp.

Apart from any other consideration, this decision had an advantage in that it was supposed to afford the child an opportunity of learning what was then designated as an "elegant accomplishment." So, a harp was installed at the school, being placed for the convenience of the tutor and pupil in the principal reception-room, an apartment connected with the entrance-hall by a long passage and two double doors, the

outer pair of which were covered in green-baize and swung to with a resounding bang when let go by the person who had opened them.

Being a reception-room, it was handsomely fitted up with shelves upon which reposed a number of nicely-bound books, chiefly of French plays and classics. To this room was the unwilling pupil sent each morning to practise alone the exercises previously set her by the " demure little Miss Essex," the new music mistress; " sent alone, most comfortably out of sight and hearing of every individual in the house."

But there was little of harp-practice, for before long " I betook myself to the book-shelves, and seeing a row of octavo volumes lettered *Théâtre de Voltaire*, I selected one of them and had deposited it in front of the music-stand, and perched myself upon the stool to read it in less time than an ordinary pupil would have consumed in getting through the first three bars of ' Ar Hyd y Nos.' The play upon which I opened was ' Zaïre.' ' Zaïre ' is not ' Richard the Third,' any more than M. de Voltaire is Shakespeare: nevertheless, the play has its merits. I proceeded to other plays—' Œdipe,' ' Mérope,' ' Alzire,' ' Mahomet,' plays well worth reading, but not so absorbing as to prevent my giving due attention to the warning doors, and putting the book in its place, and striking the chords of ' Ar Hyd y Nos ' as often as I heard a step approaching; or gathering up myself and my music, and walking quietly

back to the school-room as soon as the hour for practice had expired."

All of which was, of course, very naughty, and scarcely what the dear papa, blissfully ignorant away in Reading, would have desired! But worse was to follow. In time Voltaire was exhausted, and, hunting along the shelves, the omnivorous Miss came upon the comedies of Molière, which plunged her at once into the gaieties of his delightful world, blotting out all thought of present things—harp, music-books, and lessons—and even demure little Miss Essex vanished into thin air along with "Ar Hyd y Nos." Fascinated by the tribulations of "Sganarelle" or the lessons of the "Bourgeois Gentilhomme," she was at length caught by none other than M. St. Quintin, who found her laughing till she cried over the apostrophes of the angry father to the galley in which he is told his son has been taken captive. "Que diable alloit-il faire dans cette galère!" an apostrophe which, as she quaintly wrote, "comes true with regard to somebody in a scrape during every moment of every day, and was never more applicable than to myself at that instant."

M. St. Quintin could not chide, for, apart from his own adoration of Molière, an adoration he did not extend to music, he was convinced that no proficiency in any art could be gained without natural qualifications and sincere good-will. So he joined in the tearful laughter, and when he

could compose himself, complimented rather than rebuked the pupil upon her relish for the comic drama. More than this, he spoke plainly to the dear papa, with the result that the harp and Miss Essex went together, that music was henceforth abandoned, and the event crowned with the gift of a cheap edition of Molière for the wayward little maid's own reading.

These were the foundations skilfully laid and built upon by Miss Rowden. They marked the beginnings of a distinct and strong literary taste and a passion for the Drama which, had she and her father but known at the time, were to furnish and equip her for the stern battle of life in which she was to engage, a battle for the bare necessities of life for herself and the provision of luxuries for the careless and thriftless parent upon whom she doted and spent herself.

In August, 1802—she would then be fifteen years of age—she writes to her father: "I told you that I had finished the *Iliad*, which I admired beyond anything I ever read. I have now begun the *Æneid*, which I cannot say I admire so much. Dryden is so fond of triplets and alexandrines, that it is much heavier reading; and though he is reckoned a more harmonious versifier than Pope, some of his lines are so careless that I shall not be sorry when I have finished it. I shall then read the *Odyssey*. I have already gone through three books, and shall finish it in a fortnight . . . I am now read-

ing that beautiful opera of Metastasio, *Themistocles*; and when I have finished that, I shall read Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered.* How you would dote on Metastasio; his poetry is really heavenly," a letter which, apart from the excusable conventional school-girl gush of its closing words, is not only remarkable for its style, but for its display of a critical faculty really astounding in a girl of fifteen.

Later, in the same month, she wrote to her mother: "I am glad my sweet mamma agrees with me with regard to Dryden, as I never liked him as well as Pope. Miss Rowden had never read any translation of Virgil but his, and consequently could not judge of their respective merits. If we can get Wharton's *Æneid,* we shall finish it with that. After I have read the *Odyssey,* I believe I shall read Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* I shall be very glad of this, as I think they are extremely beautiful. . . . I am much flattered, my darlings, by the praises you bestowed on my last letter, though I have not the vanity to think I deserved them. It has ever been my ambition to write like my darlings, though I fear I shall never attain their style."

A week later, she followed this with another in similar strain: "M. St. Quintin was perfectly delighted with my French on Saturday. Signor Parachiretti is sure that I shall know Italian as well as I do French by Christmas. I know you will not think it is through vanity that I say this,

who should not say it; but I well know you like to hear that your darling is doing well, and I consult more your gratification than false modesty in relating it to you. I went to the library the other day with Miss Rowden, and brought back the first volume of Goldsmith's *Animated Nature.* It is quite a lady's natural history, and extremely entertaining. The style is easy and simple, and totally free from technical terms, which are generally the greatest objection to books of that kind. I am likewise reading the *Odyssey,* which I even prefer to the *Iliad.* I think it beautiful beyond comparison."

These few extracts from the letters not only serve to show the singular thirst for knowledge which the child possessed, but also indicate the perfect understanding which existed between the mother and child, resembling, as the Rev. A. G. L'Estrange justly remarks, "those of one sister to another."

In return Mrs. Mitford retailed all the gossip and news of Reading, giving the eager child the fullest accounts of the dinners and suppers and card-parties which formed a regular interchange of courtesies between neighbours in that town a century ago. These accounts, only intended by the fond mother, as we may properly suppose, to bridge the distance between school and home, were carefully stored away in the wonderful memory of their recipient, there to rest until, many years after, they were revivified and placed

on record for all time—as we hope—in the pages of *Belford Regis*, the work which, quite apart from *Our Village*, has endeared its writer to all ardent Reading lovers in that it affords them a true and living picture of the ancient borough as it was in the opening years of the nineteenth century.

In regard to this correspondence between the mother and daughter, it has been elsewhere remarked that "no word of advice, moral or religious, is ever mingled," and the question: "Was this wisdom?" is answered by the querist himself that, ruling out the possibility of carelessness or indifference as the motives which actuated Mrs. Mitford and "knowing what a devoted daughter Mary Mitford became, we may be well induced to believe that her mother's silence on these more serious arguments originated in deep reflection; and that she had judiciously determined simply to attach and amuse her child by her correspondence, and trusted to the impressive persuasion of her example for the inculcation of higher things." [1]

With every desire to pay the sincerest tribute to the learned editor in his difficult task, we are inclined to disagree with him as to the wisdom of Mrs. Mitford's plan. If by "example" we are to understand that the Christian virtues of for-

[1] The Rev. A. G. L'Estrange's Introduction to *The Life of Mary Russell Mitford*, related in a Selection from Her Letters to Her Friends. 3 vols., 1870.

bearance with a selfish and overmastering father and fortitude in adversity are intended, then we agree that Mary Russell Mitford well learned her lesson, but—and herein is the basis of our disagreement—had mother and daughter been less content, for the sake of peace, to pander to the every whim and caprice of Dr. Mitford, much, if not all, of the miserable poverty of later years would have been avoided, and the tragedy of Miss Mitford's life, with its last days of spiritual doubts and fears, been averted. The result on her father's career may be speculative, but we are inclined to hope that had the two women more boldly asserted their claims to consideration, the good that was in Dr. Mitford and which is to be found in all men, would have been roused, and the cruel selfishness of his life been checked if not altogether effaced.

These letters from home undoubtedly gave the fullest details of the daily occurrences, and must occasionally have tickled the schoolgirl immensely, if we may judge by one of the replies which they evoked.

"I really think," she wrote, "that my dearly-beloved mother had better have the jack-asses than the horses. The former will at least have the recommendation of singularity, which the other has not; as I am convinced that more than half the smart carriages in the neighbourhood of Reading are drawn by the horses which work in the team," a reply, the whimsicality of

which is only equalled by its pertness, when we remember that the smart carriages alluded to must have been the conveyances of the county gentry whose estates in the neighbourhood and whose lineage were not altogether insignificant. At the same time it is a reply—and for this reason is quoted—which marks the outcropping of that characteristic which Miss Mitford possessed and to which she often gave expression—an abiding distaste for anything approaching snobbery or self-assertion.

We have now come to the year 1802, a red-letter year in the child's life, inasmuch as its close was to witness the termination of her school career and that it brought to her the news that her father had purchased a house in the country, with land attached, where he intended to set up a small farm as a hobby and, generally, to live the life of a country gentleman. It is certain that the child would receive with pleasure the news of this projected change of residence, for despite the attractions which her school-life in London had for her, the interest she always displayed in matters pertaining to the country, with its free and open life, its close associations with flowers and animals, and its comparative freedom from restraint, could leave no doubt in the minds of those who knew her as to the choice she would make between life in town or country, were such a choice offered her.

Nevertheless, she was undoubtedly happy at

Hans Place, enjoying to the full the companionship and affection bestowed upon her by Miss Rowden, and the deference of M. St. Quintin, who regarded her not only as a prodigy but as a distinct credit to his establishment. Nor was this all, for her keen sense of humour and quick perception of the ludicrous side of life, found plenty of scope for their display in a school where the tutors were of mixed nationality and the scholars were drawn from various classes of society.

There is evidence of this in a letter which she wrote, some ten years later, to one of her favourite correspondents, Sir William Elford, wherein she describes a *contretemps* into which the French governess precipitated herself, mainly through over-zeal in her attempts to correct the untidy habits of her charges and, incidentally, in the hope of discomposing and so scoring off the dancing-master, whom she did not like.

It was the custom to signalize the break-up of a term by the performance of a Drama such as Hannah More's "Search after Happiness," in which Mary Mitford once took the part of Cleora; or by a ballet, on which occasions "the sides of the school-room were fitted up with bowers, in which the little girls who had to dance were seated, and whence they issued at a signal from M. Duval, the dancing-master, attired as sylphs or shepherdesses, to skip or glide through the mazy movements which he had arranged for

Doctor Mitford.
(From a painting by John Lucas, 1839.)

them, to the music of his kit." Doubtless the exhibitions proper were carried out with the utmost decorum by all concerned, seeing that a critical public, consisting of fond parents, would be assembled, ready to note, and later to comment upon, any lapse in deportment or manners. It was, however, in the rehearsals that opportunities for fun occurred, and one such occasion forms the basis of the description which we now quote.

"Madame," was a fine majestic-looking old woman of sixty, but with all the activity of sixteen and the fidgety neatness of a Dutchwoman. She had, for days, been murmuring against the untidy habits of the young ladies, and had threatened to make a terrible example of those who left their belongings lying about.

"A few exercise books found out of place were thrown into the fire, and a few skipping-ropes (one of which had nearly broken Madame's neck by her falling over it in the dark) thrown out of the window. This was but the gathering of the wind before the storm." The storm itself broke on the dancing-day and when all the pupils, dressed for the occasion, were assembled in the room. Then, to the consternation of all, Madame appeared and bidding the young ladies follow her, commenced a rummage all over the house.

"Oh! the hats, the tippets, the shoes, the gloves, the books, the music, the playthings, the

workthings, that this unlucky search discovered thrown into holes, and corners, and everywhere but where they ought to have been! Well, my dear Sir, all this immense quantity of litter was to be fastened to the person and the dress of the unfortunate little urchin to whom it belonged."

The task of apportioning the articles to the delinquents was a severe one for the governess, to whose inquiries the only reply obtainable was "Ce n'est pas à moi," with the result that she had left on her hands a large quantity of hats, gloves and slippers the ownership of which no one would acknowledge. But there were many other articles which refused to be thus abandoned, and the result was a decorative effect more novel than elegant. Dictionaries were suspended from necks *en médaillon*, shawls were tied round the waist *en ceinture*, and loose pieces of music were pinned to the dancing frocks *en queue*. "I escaped," says the merry recorder of the incident, "with a good lecture and a pocket-handkerchief fastened to my frock, which, as it was quite clean, was scarcely perceptible."

Unfortunately for Madame, the dancing-master was not due for an hour, the interval having to be devoted to the drill-sergeant, whose astonishment, when he arrived and viewed the odd habiliments of the pupils, may well be imagined. And to make matters more disconcerting for Madame and more amusing for the culprits, she could not speak a word of English, while the sergeant knew

no word of French ; so, as drill could not be performed by a squad so hampered by extraneous accoutrements, the sergeant ordered their removal, and Madame, we may well imagine, retired discomfited.

CHAPTER V

READING

THE new place of residence which Dr. Mitford acquired early in the year 1802, was known as Grazeley Court, a rambling Elizabethan structure of one-time importance, but which, at the time of Dr. Mitford's purchase, had fallen into sad decay. Originally built for a country gentleman the place had for some reason been abandoned, slowly degenerating until at length it was divided into a number of tenements occupied by agricultural labourers, for which reason and its supposed defective title the doctor was able to secure it and an adjoining eighty acres at the bargain price of a few hundred pounds.

As we have already noted, the Doctor had a certain predilection for country sports and pursuits, although at the same time he was always glad to embrace any and every opportunity afforded him for the display of his peculiar skill at cards with their concomitant excitements and hazards. In these circumstances it is diffi-

cult to understand why the residence at Reading should have been given up, bearing in mind its convenience as a centre for Town and the clubs as well as for the coursing grounds of Hampshire and Oxfordshire. Possibly the real reason was that the Doctor had been indulging in that frankness of speech which his daughter named in conjunction with a rashness of action, as one of his unfortunate characteristics; or, it may be, that this was the occasion, to which Miss Mitford refers in her *Recollections*, when he "got into some feud with that influential body the corporation."

In any case the purchase was effected, and the Doctor at once threw himself with zest into the labour of making the house habitable according to his own ideas. The situation was ideal. Three miles southwards out of Reading by the Basingstoke road, and one mile to the westward of that important thoroughfare, from which point it was reached by pleasant, overhung by-lanes, the Court occupied the centre of a large garden, at that time overgrown with rank weeds, which gave on to a narrow lane over which was afforded an extensive view to the south. First came a stretch of common, picturesquely dotted with patches of brake and clumps of wild roses intermingled with honeysuckle; in the middle distance were sundry peeps at the snug hamlet of Grazeley, and beyond these were the outlying billowy woodlands which

were then, as now, so delightful a feature of the neighbouring country-side.

As might be expected of a house built amid such surroundings in Elizabeth's day—rumour named it as of later Jacobean origin—it had a certain romantic character. We read of its "old sitting-room, with its large sunny oriel window, and its small walls wainscoted in small carved panels, and of the large oaken staircase, with a massive balustrade and broad low steps; of expansive fireplaces, with highly architectural chimney-pieces adorned with old-fashioned busts and coats-of-arms. Above all, there were two secret rooms, in which priests and cavaliers had been known to hide, and which could be well secured by inward fastenings; the one in a garret, where a triangular compartment of the wall pushed in and gave entrance to a chamber in the roof; the other, where the entire ceiling of a large light closet could be raised, and access obtained to a place of concealment capable of containing six or seven fugitives."

Such a house, in these our own times, would be eagerly snapped up were it in the market, and any amount of inconvenience suffered by its owner rather than destroy the most insignificant mark of antiquity. Possibly similar houses were less rare in Dr. Mitford's day; very probably romanticism made no appeal to him, for he quickly made up his mind to rase the whole building to the ground and erect another accord-

ing to his own design and taste. His daughter, then at school, hearing of the purchase and of her father's decision, added to it the weight of her fifteen years of wisdom by expressing the hope, in a letter to her mother, that "you will be obliged to take down your house at the farm as it will be much better to have it all new together," but she altered her opinion later on, as did her parents, when it was too late to stop the work of demolition.

If we may hazard a guess, we suspect that this purchase afforded the Doctor an outlet for that restlessness which was one of his characteristics, and gave him an opportunity for another prodigal expenditure of money. The scheme was an imposing one. A new site was chosen somewhat further back from the road than that of the older one. The garden was cleared and remodelled—no one could have objected to that, as it was sadly in need of attention—but the old wild hedge, with its delightfully rustic tangle of thorns over which scrambled a profusion of eglantines, honeysuckles and blackberries, had to give place to a severe and imposing piece of park paling, and the garden-space, once so open and affording so expansive a view across country, was converted into a plantation which, while it effectually screened the inhabitants from the gaze of the curious passer-by as effectually obstructed the magnificent outlook which was so pleasant a feature of the place. All this

was done that there might be massive gates with a devious carriage-drive up to the door.

From start to finish it was decreed that no expense was to be spared in making the new house something to be wondered at and admired by the County. Thus on April 29, 1802, the first brick was laid with the ceremony due to the illustrious event. Mrs. Mitford, who had been easily persuaded, as indeed was usual, to take the same view as her husband, gave a full account of the proceedings in a letter which she despatched next day to her daughter at Hans Place.

"Yesterday we passed the day at our farm in order to lay the first brick. I insisted on Toney [Miss Mitford's pet greyhound] being present, and as her dear little mistress was not there, she was to be, as far as she could, your substitute by putting her little paw on the brick which you should have laid had you been present. I trust you will think this was no bad idea. All the bells in Reading were ringing when we left home on this important business; but, not to arrogate too much to ourselves, and to confess the truth, I believe it was Mr. J. Bulley's generosity which called forth their cheeriest sounds. However, from whatever cause arising, we had the full benefit of the peal.

"We got to our rural retreat about half-past nine, both the men-servants attending us on horseback. At ten o'clock your old Mumpsa

[the child's pet name for her mother] laid the first brick, and placed under it a medal struck in commemoration of the centenary of the Revolution of 1688. Your darling father then placed another for himself, and a third for his beloved treasure, which he made Toney put her foot upon; and after the little rogue had done so, you would have laughed to have seen how she wagged her tail, and nodded her head upon it, as much as to say she was very proud of being admitted to have, not a finger, but a foot, in the business. The men worked merrily on until two o'clock, and then repaired to the public-house, where two legs of mutton, and bread, beer, and potatoes were provided for them. There they enjoyed themselves for the rest of the day, and this morning cheerily resumed their labours."

Having thus impressed the natives, including the landlord of "The Bell," with a sense of the importance of the new owner about to come among them, Dr. Mitford completed the business by substituting the name "Bertram House" for that of "Grazeley Court," the reason for which, did the curiosity of the neighbouring aristocracy cause them to inquire, was to be discovered in the fact that he was a scion of the Mitfords of Bertram Castle, Bertram being the original and ancient name of the family.

Judging by the very scant records of this period at our command, it would appear that

the erection of Bertram House, and its completion to Dr. Mitford's satisfaction, must have occupied nearly four years. This would give Miss Mitford a clear three years of life among the mild excitements which Reading then offered before taking up residence at Grazeley in a district which she was to immortalize—the term surely needs no justification for its use—and in which she was destined, save for a few notable occasions when duty or considerations of health called her away for short periods, to live out her life to the end.

Her introduction to the gaieties of this respectable Borough took place in the August of 1803, when she would be nearly sixteen. The occasion was the annual Race Ball, at which function it was the time-honoured custom of the race-steward to dance with the young ladies then making their début, an ordeal almost as trying to the débutante in those prim and decorous days as a presentation at Court, especially if the steward happened to be a total stranger to her. Writing to her mother, towards the end of her school career and commenting on this, Miss Mitford added—possibly to gain courage from the inditing—" I think myself very fortunate that Mr. Shaw Lefevre[1] will be steward next year, for by that time I shall hope to know him well enough to render the undertaking of dancing with him much less disagreeable." In this

[1] He represented Reading in Parliament, 1802–1820.

connexion we venture to suggest that on this occasion Mr. Shaw Lefevre would have full hands, when we remember that even at this comparatively early date Miss Mitford's figure had already assumed generous proportions and that she was short of stature into the bargain.

Naturally enough, the conclusion of school life and the re-commencement of life at home afforded the young girl the fullest opportunities for observing, noting and commenting on persons and events, a pastime in which she delighted. Her pictures of the Reading of her day are notable alike for their quaint fancies as for their fidelity. Her picture of the town—which she disguises under the name of Belford Regis—as viewed from the southern heights of Whitley, is one to which all true lovers of the old town turn with pleasure even to-day.

"About this point," she says, "is perhaps to be seen the very best view of Belford, with its long ranges of modern buildings in the outskirts, mingled with picturesque old streets; the venerable towers of St. Stephen's [St. Mary's] and St. Nicholas [St. Laurence's]; the light and tapering spire of St. John's [St. Giles']; the huge monastic ruins of the abbey; the massive walls of the county gaol; the great river winding along like a thread of silver; trees and gardens mingling amongst all; and the whole landscape enriched and lightened by the dropping elms of the foreground, adding an elusive beauty

to the picture, by breaking the too formal outline and veiling just exactly those parts which most require concealment. Nobody can look at Belford from this point, without feeling that it is a very English and very charming scene; and the impression does not diminish on further acquaintance."

Continuing, she compares the old romantic structures in which our ancestors delighted —now, unhappily, nearly all demolished—with, what she calls, the handsome and uniform buildings which are now the fashion; and she remarks on the rapid growth which the town was then making, "having recently been extended to nearly double its former size." What would she have said, we wonder, could she have foreseen the Reading of to-day with its palatial polished-granite-fronted business emporiums controlled from the Metropolis by great limited liability companies whose insatiable appetites are devouring, as their policy of grab is choking, the life from the old-time burgesses; burgesses who gloried in their town and whom their town took pleasure in honouring; men whose places are now filled by battalions of shopmen whose fixity of tenure is so doubtful as to preclude them from taking any part or interest, however slight, in the town which shelters them? And, in regard to the extension which she names with so much pride, how she would gasp with astonishment had she been told that Whitley, from

which she viewed the pleasant scene, would be turned into dreary streets of uniformly built villas, never deviating by so much as half a brick from the monotony of the usual "desirable residence"; that the old limits of the town, beyond which she could easily descry the panoramic revel of field and meadow, would be extended for nearly two miles each way, almost indeed to her beloved "Our Village," and that the population of 16,000—each unit placidly pursuing its fairly prosperous calling—would be transformed, seventy years later, into a struggling, perspiring, more or less harassed army of 88,000, the majority not daring, though they would not admit the stern impeachment, to call their bodies their own.

"The good town of Belford," she later remarks, "swarmed of course with single ladies . . . and was the paradise of ill-jointured widows and portionless old maids. They met on the table-land of gentility, passing their mornings in calls at each other's houses, and their evenings in small tea-parties, seasoned with a rubber or a pool, and garnished with the little quiet gossiping (call it not scandal, gentle reader!) which their habits required. . . . The part of the town in which they chiefly congregated, the lady's *quartier*, was one hilly corner of the parish of St. Nicholas, a sort of highland district, all made up of short rows, and pigmy places, and half-finished crescents, entirely uncontaminated by the vulgar-

ity of shops," chosen, it is suggested, "perhaps because it was cheap, perhaps because it was genteel—perhaps from a mixture of both causes." A kindly satire this, and interesting because it points so conclusively to a certain backwater near the Forbury, and under the shadow of the church of St. Laurence, which will be easily recognized by many who remember how it retained its character as a settlement for prim old ladies, of the kind described by Miss Mitford, until within quite recent times.

"Of the public amusements of the town, as I remember it at bonny fifteen," she continues, "these were sober enough. Ten years before, clubs had flourished; and the heads of houses had met once a week at the *King's Arms* for the purpose of whist-playing; whilst the ladies, thus deserted by their liege lords, had established a meeting at each other's mansions on club-nights, from which, by way of retaliation, the whole male sex was banished," save one. "At the time, however, of which I speak, these clubs had passed away; and the public diversions were limited to an annual visit from a respectable company of actors, the theatre being, as is usual in country places, very well conducted and exceedingly ill attended; to biennial concerts, equally good in their kind, and rather better patronised; and to almost weekly incursions from itinerant lecturers on all the arts and sciences, and from prodigies of every kind, whether three-

year-old fiddlers or learned dogs. There were also balls in their spacious and commodious townhall, which seemed as much built for the purposes of dancing as that of trying criminals. Public balls there were in abundance; but at the time of which I speak they were of less advantage to the good town of Belford than any one, looking at the number of good houses and of pretty young women, could well have thought possible."

These few extracts—space forbids a larger selection—are sufficient, we think, to prove how keen was the observing eye and how critical was the mind of Miss Mitford at this time when, —to use her own phrase—"I was a very young girl and, what is more to the purpose, a very shy one, so that I mixed in none of the gaieties," a statement which seems to lend support to the current saying that "the onlooker sees most of the game."

So far we have dealt with the Reading life as dating from 1797, but it is important to note that Miss Mitford speaks of a short residence in the town when she was but four years of age, and this would give us the year 1791. Unfortunately no proof for or against this is available, so far as we know, and we should scarcely have thought it worthy of mention but for another statement which she makes in her *Recollections* the authenticity of which it would be well to at least, attempt to clear up.

The statement has reference to the interest which Samuel Taylor Coleridge evinced in one of her earliest literary efforts, *Christina; or, The Maid of the South Seas*, when it was being prepared for press at about the year 1811. This interest she ascribes to "Mr. Coleridge's kind recognition of my father's exertions" in his behalf and relates to that romantic period of the poet's life when, in the December of 1793, he suddenly enlisted as a common soldier in the 15th Light Dragoons under the *nom de guerre* of "Silas Tomkyn Cumberbatch." We have it on good authority that on December 4, 1793, he was sent, with other raw recruits, to be drilled with his regiment, then garrisoned at Reading, from which date until his discharge on April 10, 1794, he clearly proved his unfitness for the calling of a man-at-arms.

The story of his discharge has been variously related, but all are agreed that his identity was revealed by his being overheard by certain of his officers reciting Greek lines, to say nothing of the polish which, scholar as he was, he could not disguise. The circumstance was sufficiently unique in those days—the gentleman ranker was a growth of later date—to occasion inquiries, and these resulted in communications with his friends, who came, identified, and bought him out. One of these officers was Captain Ogle, eldest son of that Dean of Winchester to whom, as we have noted in the earliest chapter of this book,

Dr. Mitford was on the visit which resulted in his introduction to Miss Russell.

Miss Mitford's account of the event is somewhat circumstantial, for she relates that as Dr. Ogle was on a short visit to the Mitfords, the opportunity of calling upon his father was gladly embraced by the son, who, in the course of conversation, recorded the unusual incident of the learned recruit, with the result that " one of the servants waiting at table " was " induced to enlist in his place," and the " arrangement for his [Coleridge's] discharge took place at my father's house at Reading."

The dates relative to Coleridge's enlistment and discharge are incontrovertible, therefore in view of the lack of evidence to support the idea of the Mitfords being in Reading in 1794, we are inclined to doubt—as others have doubted—the authenticity of Miss Mitford's narrative, suggesting rather, that having heard this romantic story, many years after—possibly from the lips of Captain Ogle himself—she readily assumed, with the licence of literary folk in general, that the incident took place as she recorded it.

CHAPTER VI

BERTRAM HOUSE

BERTRAM HOUSE was at last finished and the beginning of 1806 saw the Mitfords in residence. In the matter of furnishing the Doctor had spared no expense, everything being new and of the latest pattern, in fact the best that a fashionable London upholsterer could supply. Of the pictures we know that the walls were well covered and that the collection included a Gainsborough, a pair of female heads by Greuze, and a portrait of the Doctor by Opie. We have already seen, in Mrs. Mitford's description of the stone-laying ceremony, that they were attended by "the two men-servants on horseback"; this hints at a fairly complete retinue having been installed at the Reading house, but it was considerably augmented when the arrangements were completed at Grazeley. Appearances counted for much in the district and the Doctor was not the man to let slip such a grand opportunity for ostentatious display.

His hospitality was profuse and indiscriminate, resulting in a house-warming which extended

over quite a lengthy period. As an incentive —had he need of one—Dr. Mitford had recently been appointed as one of the County magistrates, a tribute of appreciation from the Whigs, of whose cause he was an earnest partizan, which gave him an immediate rise in social status.

In time, of course, the family settled down to a more or less ordered form of life, so ordered indeed that the Doctor created as many excuses as possible to cover his frequent journeys to Town and his clubs. There was sport in plenty to be had in the neighbourhood, and of this the Doctor took full advantage, being a familiar figure around the countryside with his gun and spaniels. Then, too, there were the coursing meetings—the famous meetings at Ilsley and private matches arranged between friends—none of which were considered complete unless the Doctor were present or his famous kennel represented. Throughout Miss Mitford's letters, occasionally to her father and often to friends, there are frequent references to the greyhounds whose names, in accordance with a custom prevalent then and still fashionable, all began with the letter M in token of their ownership. Thus, to name only a few, we have Mia, Manx, Marmion (a notable dog this, with an equally notable son of the same name), Mogul, Miller, Moss-Trooper, and Mopy. For all of these Miss Mitford ever exhibited the greatest affection, and in those cases where a spaniel grew too old to

follow the gun or a greyhound too stiff to be matched, an asylum under Miss Mitford's immediate eye and care was immediately provided, and the creature was henceforth looked upon as her own.

Taking advantage of this motherliness to dumb animals her father frequently handed over to her some specially valuable dog from whose later exploits as a courser he expected much. Apparently, however, the real reason for the supposed gift was not disclosed, with the result that when the dog was eventually removed the little mistress gave vent to her annoyance in no measured tones.

"It is a most extraordinary thing," she says in one communication to her father, "that I never can have a dog that I like but you immediately take it from me and burthen me with the care of some detestable brute whom you in your eternal caprice fancy a good one. Observe, however, that in giving up my own darling Mordor, I bargain that that sulky, ungrateful, mangy beast Marmion shall be sent off as soon as you come home, and that I shall again have my sweet Marian to pet and comfort me."

This was not, of course, a serious outburst, but merely the explosion of what she doubtless considered a truly righteous indignation, for, although she was no sportswoman, her love for her father gave her an interest in his pursuits, and she shared with him to the full the joy of

triumph and the sorrow of defeat, while to disparage the Mitford kennel was to offer her a personal affront. On the other hand, she was quick to convey to the Doctor any item of praise which she overheard or might have addressed to her. " We called yesterday at the Fawcetts', and the old General said he had kept greyhounds and seen many thousands, but had never had an idea of perfect and consummate beauty until he saw her " [a reference, in a letter to her father, to Mia, one of the hounds].

She had a strong dislike to equestrian exercise —the rides of babyhood across the Alresford downs with her father could not count in this connexion—and although every inducement was offered her to ride, an inglorious fall from a donkey quickly settled her convictions as to her horsemanship, and her one and only riding-habit was forthwith converted into a winter-gown. Strictly speaking, the greater portion of her time was spent at home with her mother, receiving visitors or lying for hours at a time on the sofa, where she would devour a great quantity of books at a pace which, having regard to the extraordinary knowledge she imbibed from her reading, was truly astonishing.[1] At

[1] A list kept as a check on the Circulating Library account for the years 1806 to 1811 inclusive, is a sufficient indication of this, the number for one month alone totalling fifty-five volumes and ranging through Fiction, Belles-Lettres, Travel and Biography.

other times the little green chariot, their favourite equipage, would be ordered out, calls would be returned and the drive be possibly extended to Reading, where there would always be plenty of shopping to do and calls to be made on the old neighbours and friends who would have the latest news from Town or the latest gossip of their immediate circle to retail.

With a desire to augment his income, which must have been seriously depleted by the building operations and by the subsequent reckless expenditure on the household, the Doctor now began to indulge in a series of hazardous enterprises, which, with all a gambler's insistence, he pursued intently the while they dragged him deeper and deeper into the mire. One of these was an extensive speculation in coal in which he engaged with a brother of M. St. Quintin. For this he supplied the whole of the capital in expectation of a return of £1,500 a year, but the whole thing was a failure and, with the exception of about £300, the capital was lost. Another Frenchman, a man of ingenious ideas but no money wherewith to put them to practical use, found a ready supporter in the Doctor, who was induced to advance £5,000 on the strength of a paper scheme. This man was the Marquis J. M. F. B. de Chabannes, and his scheme, a supposed improved method for the lighting and heating of houses, was embodied in a booklet which he published in 1803 with the comprehensive title of *Pros-*

pectus d'un Projet pour la Construction de Nouvelles Maisons, Dont tous les calculs de détails procureront une tres-grande Economie, et beaucoup de Jouissances. Unfortunately for its promoters, the scheme did not catch on with the public, the Marquis returned to France and the deluded Doctor continued for years to spend good money in the hope of recovering that which was irrevocably lost by suing the Marquis in the French courts, efforts which were all vain.

Meanwhile his fever for gambling grew apace and his absences from home were more and more frequent and prolonged, and the two women, being left much to themselves, conceived the notion of arranging and copying out for the press a collection of verses composed by the reverend father of Mrs. Mitford, Dr. Russell. They took considerable pains with this, to which was added a special preface by Mrs. Mitford, and when the packet was ready it was forwarded to Dr. Mitford, in Town, with a request that he should find a publisher and get as much as he could for it. Unfortunately, the sanguine editors were disappointed, for no publisher sufficiently enterprising could be found to accept the manuscript, although sundry extracts did subsequently find a certain publicity within the pages of the *Poetical Register*.

Following closely upon this effort, and in the May of 1806, Miss Mitford went for a few days on a visit to London as the guest of Monsieur

and Madame St. Quintin, her old schoolmaster and his wife. A short round of festivities had been arranged for her benefit, including a visit to the Exhibition of Water Colours, evenings at the theatres and, what appears to have been a great treat for the impressionable Miss, some hours of two days which were spent at Westminster Hall looking on at the trial of Lord Melville [1] and listening to the speeches, and for which the Doctor, then in Town and staying at *Richardson's Hotel* in Covent Garden, had procured tickets. She had now been absent from London for over three years and, no doubt, extracted a great deal of pleasure from her visit and its reunion with Fanny Rowden and Victoire St. Quintin, M. St. Quintin's sister, with both of whom, together with the Doctor, the round of sight-seeing was enjoyed.

Mrs. Mitford stayed at home, but was kept well-posted in all the news by the inevitable letters, full of critical details, from her dutiful daughter. From one of these, dated from Hans Place, May 12, 1806, we quote :—

" I have much to tell you, but it can scarcely be compressed within the bounds of a letter. On Thursday, after I wrote, Miss Ayrton, Miss Carp, papa, and I went to the Exhibition. There

[1] Impeached for malversation in his office as Treasurer of the Navy. The trial lasted sixteen days. Whitbread led for the Impeachers ; Plumer—afterwards Master of the Rolls—ably defended and secured his acquittal.

are some uncommonly fine pictures, and it is even better worth seeing than last year. In the evening, Victoire, Miss A. and myself went with papa to the play to see *The Provoked Husband* and *The Forty Thieves*. Miss Duncan in Lady Townley is most admirable. I do not much admire Elliston as her husband. The *Forty Thieves* is a very magnificent spectacle, but nothing more; for the language and music are equally vulgar and commonplace. On Friday morning we went to Oxford Street. I was extravagant enough to give half a guinea for a dress skirt for myself, which I wore the next day to the trial. We were rather disappointed in Mr. Romilly.[1] The speech in itself was beautiful beyond description; but he wants animation, and drops his voice at the end of every sentence. . . . Miss Rowden, papa, and I are going to see *Henry the Eighth* to-night, and we are going to Westminster Hall to-morrow. . . . I shall hope to return Thursday or Friday; for, though I am greatly amused here, I am never quite happy without my dear, dear mother."

Two days later this was followed by a still more characteristic effusion. The second day at Westminster Hall decided her that: "Mr. Romilly is charming and interesting; but my first and greatest favourite is Mr. Whitbread. Mr. Plumer is rather an inelegant speaker, though very animated. I have promised papa to write

[1] Sir Samuel Romilly, Solicitor-General.

some verses to Mr. Whitbread. He has even superseded Mr. Fox in my good graces. I did not tell you, I believe, that I had the happiness of seeing Mr. Fox mount his horse on Saturday. I shall never again contend for his beauty. He was obliged to lean on two people, and looked so sallow and pale in the face, and so unwieldy in person, that I am obliged to yield our long-disputed point." Rather hard on poor Mr. Fox, whom, hitherto, this exuberant young person had worshipped as a hero, even to the extent of removing her watch-stand from the head of her bed that it might give place to a bust of this gentleman which the Doctor had sent from Town. On this occasion it was a case of "Off with the old love and on with the new" in double-quick time, for, continuing, she says: "To make me amends my new favourite is what even you would call exquisitely handsome; a most elegant figure, and a voice which I could listen to with transport, even if he spoke in an unknown language. Mr. Plumer attacked him with the most virulent irony and ridicule; and Mr. W. stood with his face turned towards him and leant upon the desk, smiling the whole time, with the most fascinating good humour. You know I am always an enthusiast; but at present it is impossible to describe the admiration I feel for this exalted character."

We quote these extracts with no thought of ridiculing the ardent partisan, but as a fore-

shadowing of that enthusiasm and that quick impressibility which ever seemed to dominate Miss Mitford's life; characteristics which often led her into excesses of transport at the discovery, or supposed discovery, of some noble trait in the characters of those who came within her ken, only to be as quickly repented of; often giving unintentional pain to others and resulting in an infinitude of trouble and annoyance to herself. Despite this temperamental defect, however, and while her friends looked on amazed at her infidelity, there was one to whom she remained unwaveringly faithful to the end, though this object of her great affection was the least worthy of all who came into her life.

Mr. Whitbread, favoured man, was the immediate recipient of some verses from his ardent admirer. They reached him, ten days after his Westminster display of elegance and fortitude, through Dr. Mitford, to whom they were posted from Bertram House under cover of the following ingenuous letter: "May 24, 1806.—I claim great merit, my dear darling, in sending you the enclosed lines, for I am not satisfied with them; but I would sooner mortify my own vanity by sending you bad verses, than break my promise by withholding them. I have called them impromptu to excuse their incorrectness; and though some may suspect them to be an impromptu *fait à loisir*, you must not betray the

secret. From a perfect consciousness of my own enthusiasm, I have been so much afraid of saying too much, that I have fallen into the opposite fault and said too little. However, I had rather be thought anything but a flatterer, though it be in my opinion impossible to flatter Mr. Whitbread; for what language can equal his merits? Do not impute the faults and deficiencies in these lines to my laziness; for I assure you they cost me an infinite deal of trouble; but they are not good enough to show, and I had rather you would return them to me immediately. At all events, let me know how you like them, and what you have done with them."

Not to be misled by the feigned artlessness of his daughter's concluding sentences, the Doctor, as we have said, passed on the verses to Mr. Whitbread, who was pleased to acknowledge and eulogise them; and since they deserve it we give them below:—

IMPROMPTU ON HEARING MR. WHITBREAD DECLARE IN WESTMINSTER HALL, ON FRIDAY, MAY 16, 1806, THAT HE "FONDLY TRUSTED HIS NAME WOULD DESCEND WITH HONOUR TO POSTERITY."

The hope of Fame thy noble bosom fires,
Nor vain the hope thy ardent mind inspires;
In British breasts, whilst Purity remains,
Whilst Liberty her blest abode retains,

Still shall the muse of History proclaim
To future ages thy immortal name.
And while fair Scotia weeps her favoured son,
By place corrupted and by power undone,
England with pride her upright patriot sees,
And Glory's brightest wreath to him decrees.

CHAPTER VII

THE TRIP TO NORTHUMBERLAND

WITH a proper and increasing pride in his clever daughter, the Doctor now conceived the idea of taking her with him on an extended trip into Northumberland, thereby affording her some acquaintance with the scenes amidst which his family had lived for generations, a trip which would serve the double purpose of impressing the girl with a sense of the importance of her ancestors and present relations and of introducing her to the latter who, although they must have heard of her, had never yet seen her.

The journey was begun on Saturday, September 20, 1806, the first stage, that from Reading to London being by coach. From London they travelled in the carriage of Nathaniel Ogle, who personally conducted them to his own place in Northumberland, from which they were to make their various excursions in the district. Mrs. Mitford did not accompany them, but was kept well informed, as usual, by her daughter.

The first letter is dated from Royston, September 21: "We had a very long interval be-

tween the parting from my most beloved darling and the leaving Reading. The coach was completely full; and it was fortunate papa had secured a place on the box, where he continued during the whole journey. The company in the inside had the merit of being tolerably quiet; and I do not remember any conversation which lasted longer than a minute. I, certainly, ought not to complain of their silence, as I was more than equally taciturn, and scarcely spoke during the whole way. I was quite low-spirited, but never less fatigued by travelling. Both Mr. Joy and Dr. Valpy [1] met us before we left Reading, and M. St. Quintin and Victoire met us at the Bath Hotel. As soon as Victoire left me, I retired to bed, under the idea of pursuing our journey early in the morning. It was, however, half-past ten before Mr. Ogle got up, and we did not leave town till twelve. We employed the interval in going to the bookseller's for a Cobbett, and bought a *Cary's Itinerary*, an edition of *Peter Pindar*, and a few plays. The Edition of P. P. which we bought cheap, remains in town; but the others are our travelling companions. We went by Enfield to see Mary Ogle, and finding them at dinner we dined at Mrs. Cameron's; we then changed horses at Waltham Cross; again at Wade's Mill; and are just arrived here, where we sleep to-night. Mr. Ogle is

[1] Rev. Richard Valpy, D.D., equally famous as a Greek scholar and as Head-Master of Reading Grammar School.

extremely pleasant, and the carriage very convenient. We went the two first stages on the box of the barouche. I need not tell you, my dearest darling, that we felt nothing so much as the loss of your society; and I have wished myself at home fifty times in the last twenty-four hours, to be again with my dear mamma."

Apart from the interest which, in these days, is always attached to an old-time account of stage-travel the letter is interesting by reason of the variety of literature purchased for perusal on the journey. The Cobbett referred to would probably be *Cobbett's Political Register* (then being issued in parts), and intended for the Doctor's personal reading; he being not only an admirer but an intimate friend of the outspoken reformer. *Cary's Itinerary* was, of course, the well-known road-book and constant companion of all who travelled in stage-coach days; though why Miss Mitford was not content with her dainty, green-leather-covered copy of *Bowles' Post-Chaise Companion* in two vols.—now a valued possession of the author's—is difficult to understand, unless it was overlooked in the hurry and excitement of departure. *Peter Pindar's Works*, then just completed in five vols., would be a valuable addition to the library at home, but the purchase of the plays is significant, proving the influence which Fanny Rowden had exercised on the mind of her pupil, inculcating a taste for the Drama which was to be of lasting importance.

The next letter is written from Little Harle Tower—a small place about fourteen miles from Morpeth—and is dated Sunday Evening, September 28.—

"I arrived here with Lady Charles,[1] about two hours since, my dearest mamma; and I find from papa that in his letter to you to-night he never mentioned that the irregularity of the post, which *never* goes oftener than three times a week from hence, will prevent our writing again till Wednesday, when we go to Sir William Lorraine's, and hope to get a frank from Colonel Beaumont, whom we are to meet there. It is only by Lord Charles going unexpectedly to Morpeth that I am able to write this, merely to beg you not to be alarmed at not hearing oftener. I imagine papa has told you all our plans, which are extremely pleasant. Lord and Lady Charles stay longer in the country on purpose to receive us, and have put off their visit to Alnwick Castle that they may take me there, as well as to Lord Grey's, Colonel Beaumont's, and half a dozen other places."

The reference in this letter to a "frank" is one which frequently occurs in Miss Mitford's correspondence. It was, as Sir Rowland Hill once said, an "expedient for saving postage"—"discreditable shifts" another writer called them. In the days before the institution of PennyPostage

[1] Lady Charles Aynsley, a wealthy first-cousin of the Doctor's.

—an event which put an end to "franking"—Members of Parliament enjoyed the privilege of having their letters delivered and despatched free of charge. To secure this, members had merely to write their names on the covers to ensure free passage through the post, and frequently furnished their friends with packets of franks which were placed aside for use as occasion required. This latter expedient was, of course, a flagrant abuse of the privilege, and in one year it was computed that, had postage been paid on the franked correspondence, the revenue would have been increased by £170,000! In an endeavour to check this abuse it was enacted that the whole superscription must be in the handwriting of the Member, and that the frank was only available on the date (which it was necessary to name) which was on the cover. While the regulation certainly diminished the quantity of franking it did not put an end to the use of the privilege by other than Members, to whom it became the custom to despatch an accumulated batch of letters, intended for a number of people, with explicit instructions as to their destinations. The annoyance caused to Members, and the general confusion which sometimes resulted from this practice, may be better imagined than described. Miss Mitford herself gives us an amusing account of the troubles and trials of those who both used and abused the franking privilege, in her sketch on "The Absent Member," in *Belford Regis*.

In the next letter which Miss Mitford wrote we have a record of some amusing table-talk, essentially feminine in character and which, undoubtedly, greatly impressed the observant young person who overheard it. It is addressed still from Little Harle Tower, dated October 3, and after a short description of the scenery, and the mud—which caused her to beg to be excused from such excursions in the future—she relates an account of a dinner at Sir William Lorraine's at which Colonel and Mrs. Beaumont were of the party.—

"Mrs. B. was so polite as to express great regret that, as she was going from home, she could not see us at her house, but hoped, when next we came to Northumberland, we should come to see them at Hexham Abbey. She is a very sweet woman. . . . Mrs. B. told Lady Charles that they received last year a hundred thousand pounds from their lead mines in Yorkshire; and they never make less than eighty thousand, independent of immense incomes from their other estates. Mrs. B. was dressed in a lavender-coloured satin, with Mechlin lace, long sleeves, and a most beautiful Mechlin veil. The necklace she wore was purchased by her eldest son, a boy of eleven, who sent it from the jeweller's without asking the price. It is of most beautiful amethysts; the three middle stones are an inch and a half long and an inch wide; the price was nine hundred guineas. Mrs. B. wished to return it; but the Colonel not only confirmed the pur-

chase, but gave his son some thousands to complete the set of amethysts by a bandeau and tiara, a cestus for the waist, armlets, bracelets, brooches, sleeve-clasps, and shoe-knots. All these she wore, and I must confess, for a small dinner-party appeared rather too gaily decorated, particularly as Lady Lorraine's dress was quite in the contrary extreme. I never saw so strong a contrast . . . Colonel Beaumont is generally supposed to be extremely weak, but I sat next him at dinner, and he conducted himself with infinite propriety and great attention and politeness; yet when away from Mrs. Beaumont, he is (they say) quite foolish, and owes everything to her influence." Added to this cryptic description—cryptic because, read it how we will, we cannot be sure that there is not a subtle touch of sarcasm in the words—is a shrewd observation on another visitor whom she calls Mr. M.

"I told you I was not enamoured of Mr. M., and I will now describe him to you. . . . He is an oddity from affectation; and, I often think, no young man affects singularity when he can distinguish himself by anything better. He affects to despise women, yet treats them with great respect; and he makes the most extraordinary exertions to provoke an argument, from which he generally escapes by some whimsical phrase."

The letter concludes with a long list of festivities which are to take place in honour of her visit. Following on these, they journeyed to Kirkley,

Mr. Ogle's seat, whither it was originally intended they should travel direct but were deterred from so doing by the hospitality offered *en route*. As a matter of fact their stay at Kirkley was a short one, due to the same cause which had prevented their earlier arrival.

The only letter addressed from Kirkley is dated Wednesday morning, October 8 :—

"We arrived here on Monday at about three o'clock; received with great glee by the Squire, and, after taking a short walk in the garden, returned to dress. We had some time to wait for Lord and Lady Charles, who did not arrive before half-past five or near six, and even then undressed. They had been detained by the axle-tree breaking down, and the detestable roads. Without their waiting to dress, we immediately sat down to dinner and spent a most delightful day. In the evening we found a manuscript play which had been sent last year for Mr. Sheridan's perusal.[1] It is taken from a very striking story in the *Canterbury Tales*, of which I have forgotten the title . . . I read it aloud to the ladies, and the gentlemen played billiards, and occasionally visited us. The play, which bears the name of 'Sigendorf,' is really extremely interesting, and much better, as to language, than most modern

[1] Richard Brinsley Sheridan. His second wife was a Miss Ogle, and a cousin of Dr. Mitford. Miss Mitford thought her "a vain woman."

productions. Sheridan had never looked at it, and Mr. Ogle lent it to Lady Charles.

"Yesterday morning, after a long walk, Lord and Lady C. left us. We had an excellent dinner, and amused ourselves in the evening with the 'Liber Veritatis,' which is, as you may remember, a very expensive collection of two hundred of Claude Lorraine's sketches, published by Boydell.

"We are going in about an hour to Little Harle . . . for Mr. Ogle and papa remain here together. We go to-morrow to Alnwick and return the same night. To-morrow is expected to be a very full day at the Castle, on account of the Sessions Ball. The ladies—the married ones I mean—go in Court dresses, without hoops, and display their diamonds and finery on the occasion.

"Mr. Ogle is quite a man of gallantry and makes his house extremely pleasant. We talk of coming to see him again next week, when my cousin Mary and I are left to keep house alone at Morpeth, and my uncle and aunt go to Little Harle Tower."

From Morpeth, on October 11, was despatched a very long letter, too long indeed for quotation in full, but from which we must give a few extracts. It begins :—

"In papa's letter of yesterday, my dearest darling mamma, he promised that I would write you a long one to-day, and I certainly owe you one in return for the very entertaining epistle I received yesterday. After we left Kirkley, we

called at Belsay, and saw Lady Monck and the little Atticus, who was born at Athens fifteen months since. He is a very fine boy, very like Sir Charles. Belsay is a very old castle, and its eccentric possessor has done all he possibly could desire to render it still more *outré* by stopping up the proper road, and obliging us to approach this fine specimen of Gothic architecture through the farm-yard. We arrived at Little Harle to dinner; and you would have been greatly amused at my having my hair cut by Lord Charles's *friseur*, who is by occupation a joiner, and actually attended with an apron covered with glue, and a rule in his hand instead of scissors. He, however, performed his office so much to my satisfaction, that I appointed him to dress my hair the next morning for my visit to Alnwick. While I was thus employed, Lady Swinburne called on purpose to see me. Lady Charles said I was out walking. She is, you know, niece to the Duke of Northumberland, and I regretted not seeing her.

"Thursday morning we rose early and prepared for our visit. I wore my ball gown, and Lady C. lent me a beautiful necklace of Scotch pebbles, very elegantly set, which had been presented to her by the Duchess of Athole, with brooches and ornaments to match. I kept my front hair in papers till I reached Alnwick . . . I would not attempt a description of Alnwick Castle, my dear mamma, but I must tell you it is

by no means so very princely a residence as I had imagined. The entrance is extremely striking. After passing through three massy gateways, you alight and enter a most magnificent hall, lined with servants, who repeat your name to those stationed on the stairs; these again re-echo the sound from one to the other, till you find yourself in a most sumptuous drawing-room of great size, and as I should imagine, forty feet in height. This is at least rather formidable; but the sweetness of the Duchess soon did away every impression but that of admiration. We arrived first, and Lady Charles introduced me with particular distinction to the whole family; and during the whole day I was never, for one instant, unaccompanied by one of the charming Lady Percys, and principally by Lady Emily, the youngest and most beautiful. We sat down sixty-five to dinner, and I was within three of the Duchess . . . After dinner, when the Duchess found Lady Charles absolutely refused to stay all night, she resolved at least that I should see the castle, and sent Lady Emily to show me the library, chapel, state bed-rooms, etc. This dear, charming Duchess is generally thought very proud; and Lord Charles says he never knew her so attentive to any young person before. . . . At nine we went to the Ball; and the room was so bad, and the heat so excessive, that I determined, considering the long journey we had to take, not to dance, and refused my cousin Mitford of Mit-

Mary Russell Mitford.
(From a drawing by Joseph Slater.)

ford, Mr. Selby, Mr. Alder, and half a dozen more whose names I have forgotten. At half-past ten we took leave of the Duchess and her amiable daughters, and commenced our journey homeward, after a most delightful visit." On the journey they lost their way and did not arrive at Morpeth until seven o'clock in the morning. The letter concludes :—" Seventy miles, a splendid dinner, and a ball all in one day ! Was not this a spirited expedition, my darling ? Papa is to be very gay this week with Nat [Nathaniel Ogle]. He left us to-day in excellent health and spirits."

Despite the temporary absence of the Doctor, the gay doings of this triumphal march continued, of which the fullest accounts were dispatched to the delighted mother alone at Bertram House.

These brought letters in return giving, as usual, all the news of the farm and of the progress of events in Reading, which at that time was being engrossed by the Greek Plays, performed with remarkable ability by the boys of the Grammar School under the direction of Dr. Valpy, and by the excitement consequent upon the near approach of a Parliamentary election. In reference to this Miss Mitford wrote to her mother, possibly with a sense of foreboding, for she knew her father's every weakness :—" I only hope Mr. Shaw Lefevre will be well enough to canvass for himself, without requiring papa's presence, which would be rather inconvenient at present."

Doctor Mitford was still enjoying his gay week

with Nathaniel Ogle, the arrangement being that upon his return to Morpeth and his daughter he was to conduct her to Hexham, the place of his birth. Meanwhile a short programme of sight-seeing had been mapped out for Miss Mitford, which would occupy the interval remaining before the father and daughter had arranged to meet. Unfortunately, however, the Doctor, upon receipt of an intimation from Mr. Shaw Lefevre's agent, hurried off to Reading at a moment's notice, without so much as an apology to his host and with only a hastily scribbled note to his daughter in which he offered no suggestions as to what she should do, practically leaving her to her own devices both in excusing his erratic behaviour and as to finding the means of returning home.

Nathaniel Ogle was furious, the friends in Northumberland were amazed, while Miss Mitford was both distracted and indignant. Between her tears she at once wrote off to her father at Reading, rebuking him with such dignity that, had he possessed any sense of propriety he must, upon reading it, have been thoroughly ashamed.

" It is with great reluctance, my dearest darling, that I am compelled to say that I never have experienced so disagreeable a surprise as in receiving your letter yesterday. What could possibly influence you to prefer Mr. Lefevre's paltry vanity of being at the head of the poll (for of his election he was certain) to Nat Ogle's friendship and your daughter's comfort ? Lady

Charles leaves Little Harle on the 4th. On the 1st she is obliged to bring me to Morpeth; and *she* says that she shall be miserable in the idea of leaving me there, for your uncle, you well know, is in a state which must be dreadful to any one, and to a visitor most particularly so. You must have seen, before you left Morpeth, that your uncle's faculties were very much decayed; and Mary says that his fits of passion are such as to give you the idea of being in a hospital for lunatics.

"Is this a time for me to stay, or my aunt to receive me with any comfort? If you need any other motive to return, I must tell you that Mr. Ogle is extremely offended at your leaving him in this manner; and nothing but your *immediately* coming back can ever excuse you to him.

"I now implore you to return, and I call upon mamma's sense of propriety to send you here directly. Little did I suspect that my father, my dear, beloved father, would desert me in this manner, at this distance from home. Every one is surprised. They had thought that your parental affection was the strongest sentiment of your heart, and little thought it would yield so entirely to your *friendship* for any one. I expect no answer but a personal one, for it is utterly impossible that you should have any motive to detain you so strong as those I have given you for your return.

"I have had a charming excursion, but I am a great deal too much discomposed to give you

any particulars of it. . . . Pray return, my dear papa. You and mamma have ever my warmest affection, but *you* are rather out of favour at present; yet I am still fondly my Ittey boy's own

"M. R. MITFORD."

Two days later she received a letter from her father to say that he had set out for Bertram House which called forth a protest, this time to her mother, to whom she expressed surprise at her father's singular behaviour.

"Happy as you must always be to see that dear, that most beloved of men, I am persuaded that upon this occasion you would not be pleased at his arrival. It has left me in a most awkward situation, and Mr. Ogle, whom I have just left, is extremely offended at his departure. In the name of goodness, dearest mamma, persuade my own darling to come back again directly. . . . It is surely a very odd thing for a young woman to be left in this strange manner. I hope you will be able to prevail upon papa to return immediately, or he will lose a very excellent and very attached *old friend*, and do no material service to the *new one*, for whose sake he seems to forget all other things and persons. . . . Much as I love him, it is not from a capricious affection, but from an unfeigned sense of propriety, that I desire his return. Heaven bless you, my dearest,

best mamma ! I am ever, with the fondest affection, your and my dear runaway's own

" MARY RUSSELL MITFORD.

" *If papa happens to open this letter, he must remember it is meant for mamma, and he must not read it.*"

It must be evident, from these letters, that Miss Mitford very keenly felt the thoughtless conduct of her father, not only on account of her own predicament, but because it was creating a very bad impression as to the Doctor's own character on the Northumbrian relatives and friends.

Fortunately the father's absence did not put a complete stop to the programme of excursions, although it did much to mar the pleasure of them for at least one member of the party. Details of these excursions were embodied in a succession of further letters to Mrs. Mitford and included an account of a narrow escape from death upon a very steep hill; a visit to Lord Tankerville at Chillingham, where the proud owner personally drove up his famous herd of wild white cattle for his visitor's benefit; a journey to Chevy Chase, and another dinner at Alnwick Castle. In one of these letters Miss Mitford again reverts to her father's escapade saying, " there never was so hare-brained a thing done as his running off in this manner," concluding with " it is impossible to describe how much I long to see my

mother, my own darling mother. Nothing can exceed the affection which I am treated with here, or the pains they take to amuse me; but if I stay three weeks longer without seeing you I shall be absolutely miserable. I must never marry, that is certain, for I never should be able to support an absence of three months from my beloved parents."

A week went by but still the Doctor did not arrive, with the result that Miss Mitford wrote to her mother suggesting that one of the maids be sent off at once to bear her company in the coach to London. The letter plainly indicates that she was not only growing desperate but low-spirited. "Do you know, my dear mamma, that in spite of my little boy having so entirely forsaken and forgotten me (for I have never received even a note from him since his departure), I could not leave the country without seeing his native place, which Lady Charles assures me has no other recommendation than *that*, as it is perhaps the ugliest town in England. My cousin is so good as to promise to take me there to-morrow if it is a fine day.

"I hope you, my dear mamma, gave him a good scolding for coming without me, for every one else seems to have forgotten me. I think I might slip out of the world now very quietly, without being regretted even by my dog or any one but my darling mamma. Luckily I have no mind to try the experiment."

The promised visit to Hexham took place the next day.

"We dined at a very wretched inn, for I must confess, in spite of the prepossession I felt in favour of my dear Ittey's native town, that Hexham is a shocking gloomy place. After dinner I had the pleasure of visiting the house where my darling was born. It has been an extremely good one, and still retains a very respectable appearance; but it is now divided, and on one side of the street door, which still remains, is a collar maker's shop, and on the other a milliner's. We entered the latter and purchased three pairs of Hexham gloves, one for papa, one for my dearest mamma, and one for Ammy. I thought that, both as a memorial of the town and of the house, you would like that better than any other trifle I could procure. Our return was very tedious and disagreeable; but I was gratified on my arrival by finding a letter from papa, directed to Morpeth, in which he promises to be there as to-day. I cannot think, my darling, why you did not send him off on Wednesday, for the eating and drinking, and bawling at the Election will do him more harm than twenty journeys. Gog, he says, is very ill. God forgive me, but I do not pity him. He deserves some punishment for endeavouring to play such a trick upon papa and me."

Gog was the Mitfords' nick-name for Mr. Shaw Lefevre, on whom in her anxiety to find an

excuse for her father's inexplicable conduct, Miss Mitford strove to fasten the blame for the whole incident. Her complaint was that, in a letter which arrived after her father's departure, he had "pretended with great quietness and a profusion of thanks to decline papa's kind offer of coming to his assistance at the time he must have known that his agent had sent for him, and that he would already be in Reading when his letter arrived here: and to fancy any one would be deceived by so flimsy a trick is not a little degrading to our understandings."

Dr. Mitford returned on November 2, after an absence of exactly twelve days, and just in time to throw himself, with his accustomed abandon, into the turmoil of the Morpeth and Newcastle elections, which closely followed each other during the month. At the end of November, he and his daughter, and Mr. Ogle, with whom he had made his peace, travelled to London together, and so home.

Thus ended the first and only visit Miss Mitford ever paid to the North. In reality it was little short of a triumphal tour for her, made memorable by the excessive kindness which every one seemed determined to lavish upon her. Apart from the period she spent at school, it ranks as the outstanding event of her life and would have been entirely free from any shadow whatsoever but for the incident in which her father was the central and culpable figure.

With a readiness to overlook and condone all his faults—and they were many—she seems to have both forgiven and forgotten the episode, content to dwell only on the brighter memories with which the holiday abounded.

"Years, many and changeful, have gone by since I trod those northern braes; they at whose side I stood, lie under the green sod; yet still, as I read of the Tyne or of the Wansbeck, the bright rivers sparkle before me, as if I had walked beside them but yesterday. I still seem to stand with my dear father under the grey walls of that grand old abbey church at Hexham, whilst he points to the haunts of his boyhood. Bright river Wansbeck! How many pleasant memories I owe to thy mere name!"

It is one of her old-age memories of those wonderful two-months in the fall of 1806, and although, as we know, her father was not by her side as she describes, the picture may well stand as a fitting close to the chapter.

CHAPTER VIII

LITERATURE AS A SERIOUS AND PURPOSEFUL OCCUPATION

EXCEPT for very brief intervals, when the Reading races or some coursing meeting engaged his attention, Dr. Mitford was rarely to be found at home, with the result that the "farm" was left very much to the men, with such supervision as Mrs. Mitford might care, or be able, to give it. Money was getting scarce at Bertram House and the Doctor therefore resorted, more than ever, to the Clubs, in the hope that his skill at cards might once again tempt the fickle Goddess at whose shrine he was so ardent a votary. Nathaniel Ogle was his crony and between them they went the round of the gaming-tables with results which proved that either the Doctor's powers were on the wane or that he was being subjected to frequent frauds.

It is a regrettable fact, but must be recorded, that both Mrs. and Miss Mitford appear to have been fully cognizant of his habits; whether they knew the extent of his losses, or realized what these losses meant with regard to their

future comfort is a debatable point, although from what we are able to gather from the scant records at our command we incline to the belief that Mrs. Mitford was scarcely capable of either controlling or influencing a husband of Dr. Mitford's temperament. Both by birth and upbringing she was absolutely unfitted for the task. Doubtless she had made her feeble remonstrances, but these proving of no avail she resigned herself to a policy of *laissez-faire*, in the belief, possibly, that whatever happened, their condition could never be as bad as in the black days which followed the flight from Lyme Regis and her husband's confinement within the King's Bench Rules. If under similar conditions a man might claim extenuating circumstances by urging his wife's apathy, then Dr. Mitford would assuredly be entitled to our mercy, if not to our sympathy ; but, happily, the world has not yet sunk so low as to condone a man's misdemeanours on such a ground, so that Dr. Mitford stands condemned alone.

A series of letters addressed to him during 1807, to the care of "Richardson's Hotel," or the "Star Office" in Carey Street, convey some idea of the anxiety which his prolonged absence was occasioning his wife and daughter at home, while at the same time they give him tit-bits of domestic news.

"As lottery tickets continue at so high a price, had you not better dispose of yours, for I am

not sanguine with respect to its turning out a prize, neither is mamma; but consult your better judgment. I think you have to deal with a slippery gentleman. You would do well to introduce a rule, that whoever introduces a gentleman should be responsible for him; that is, supposing that you mean to continue to play there; though my advice has always been, that you should stick to Graham's, where, if you have not an equal advantage, you have at least no trouble, and know your society. You have always gained more there, on an average, than with chance players like the Baron, or at inferior clubs, like the one you now frequent. . . . I need not say, my darling, how much we long again to see you, nor how greatly we have been disappointed when, every succeeding day, the journey to Reading has been fruitless. The driver of the Reading coach is quite accustomed to be waylaid by our carriage." The letter from which this is an extract is dated February 11, 1807, and begins with a lament over a caged owl, found dead that morning, and gives news of the expansion of a hyacinth which "I fear, if you do not hasten to return, you will lose its fresh and blooming beauty."

The next letter dated February 15, records the sudden drooping and destruction of the hyacinth and contains a plea that the Doctor will not waste money on the purchase of a fur cap for his daughter, a gift he contemplated making

after seeing his kinswoman, Mrs. Sheridan, in a similar head-dress. "Mrs. Sheridan's dress is always singular and fantastic," continues the letter, "but even if this masculine adornment be fashionable, the season is so far advanced that it would be impossible to wear it above a month longer."

But it must not be thought that these were the only topics touched upon in the correspondence between father and daughter. Some of the letters reveal an extraordinary interest in Politics which must, surely, have been unusual among women a century ago. They also clearly indicate that the same critical faculty which was applied to literature by Miss Mitford was also focussed on men and manners. "What Grattan may be when speaking upon so interesting a subject as places and pensions, I know not; but when he was brought in last Parliament to display his powers upon the Catholic question (which is, I admit, to party men a subject of very inferior importance), the House was extremely disappointed. If I remember rightly, he was characterized as a 'little, awkward, fidgetty, petulant speaker'; and the really great man who then led the Opposition easily dispensed with his assistance. . . . I perfectly agree with you as to the great merit of Lord Erskine's very eloquent speech; and, as he was against the Catholic question, his opinions will have more weight with the country than those of any other

of the ex-ministers. I always thought Lord Sidmouth a very bad speaker. His sun is set, never, I hope, to rise again!"

Of Shaw Lefevre she evidently entertained a poor opinion and appears to have been unable to forgive or forget his supposed complicity in the plot to bring the Doctor to Reading during Election time.

"Mr. Lefevre sported some intolerably bad puns, which were, I suppose, intended for our entertainment; but they did not discompose my gravity." This was after a visit he and his wife had paid to Bertram House, on which occasion he must have had a chilly reception from one, at least, of the ladies. She continues: "I believe that he has no inclination to meet you, and was glad to find you were in town. Little minds always wish to avoid those to whom they are under obligations, and his present 'trimming' in politics must conspire to render him still more desirous not to meet you, till he has found which party is *strongest.* That will, I am of opinion, decide which he will espouse. . . . In short, the more I know of this gentleman the more I am convinced that, under a roughness of manner, he conceals a very extraordinary pliancy of principles and a very accommodating conscience. He holds in contempt the old-fashioned manly virtues of firmness and consistency, and is truly 'a vane changed by every wind.' If he votes with the Opposition to-day,

it will only be because he thinks them likely to be again in power; and it will, I really think, increase my contempt for him, if he does not do so." Had poor Mr. Lefevre been anxious to propitiate his little critic, and had he seen the concluding sentence of her letter as above, he must surely have been nonplussed as to the course of conduct necessary to achieve that end!

During this year it is certain that Miss Mitford began seriously to think of authorship in the light of something more than a dilettante pastime and the scribbling of heroic verses to the notable men whom her father was constantly meeting as he gadded about town. Doubtless the haunting fear of impending disaster had much to do with this, though possibly she conveyed no hint to her parents as to the real cause of her diligence. "We go out so much that my work does not proceed so fast as I could wish" is the burden of a letter she wrote towards the end of May, "although," she adds, "I am very happy I have seen Lord Blandford's, my darling, as I should, if I had not, always have fancied it something superior."

Lord Blandford's was the estate known as "Whiteknights Park," still existing on the southern heights overlooking Reading. During the twelfth century the land maintained a house which was attached to the Hospital for Lepers founded by Aucherius, the second Abbot of Reading Abbey. It was purchased in 1798 by

the Marquis of Blandford (subsequently Duke of Marlborough) who spent a considerable sum in having the grounds laid out in the landscape style. Miss Mitford was not only disappointed but severely criticised the whole scheme, whilst of the lake she wrote: "and the piece of water looks like a large duck pond, from the termination not being concealed." With the perversity of her sex—and it was a habit from which she was never free—her later descriptions of the place are quite eulogistic and she refers to

> "These pure waters, where the sky
> In its deep blueness shines so peacefully;
> Shines all unbroken, save with sudden light
> When some proud swan majestically bright
> Flashes her snowy beauty on the eye; "

and she closes the Sonnet with—

> "A spot it is for far-off music made,
> Stillness and rest—a smaller Windermere."

During this period she was also busily occupied in transcribing the manuscripts of her old friend and governess, Fanny Rowden, and was most anxious for the success of that lady's recently-published poem entitled *The Pleasures of Friendship*. With an excess of zeal which ever characterized her labours for those she loved, she was continually urging her father to try and interest any of his friends who might be useful, and to this end suggested that the poem be shown to Thomas Campbell and to Samuel Rogers. Of Samuel Rogers she confesses that she

can find no merit in his work, except "polished diction and mellifluous versification," but at the same time records her own and her mother's opinion that Miss Rowden's poem is a "happy mixture of the polish of Rogers and the animation of Campbell," with whose works it must rank in time.

With the exception of a short period during the year 1808 the Doctor was still to be found in London. This exception was caused by the Reading Races at which the Doctor was a regular attendant. On this particular occasion young William Harness, son of Mrs. Mitford's trustee and then a boy at Harrow, was of the party. He went in fulfilment of an old promise, but the pleasure of his visit was considerably lessened by the fact that he noticed how greatly altered was the Mitford's mode of living. It is recorded in his *Life* that "a change was visible in the household; the magnificent butler had disappeared; and the young Harrow boy by no means admired the Shabby Equipage in which they were to exhibit themselves on the race-course."

No hint of this state of things is to be found in the letters of the period, nor can we trace even the vestige of a murmur in them from the mother and daughter who must have been torn with anxiety. Here and there, however, there is a suspicion of disappointment at the long absence of the Doctor and his failure to fulfil promises

of certain return. Nearly every letter contains some phrase indicative of this, such as: "I hope Mr. Ogle will not long detain you from us"; "Heaven bless you, my beloved! We long for your return, and are ever most fondly," etc.; or,—"I have myself urged a request to be favoured with the second canto [of Miss Rowden's poem] by your worship's return; which felicity, as you say nothing to the contrary, we may, I presume, hope for on Thursday"; to which was added, by way of reminder of their many disappointed attempts to meet him in Reading, "but you must expect, like all deceivers, not to be so punctually attended to this time as before."

Miss Mitford was never the one to sit about the house, crying and moping over wreckage, the naturally corollary to which would have been an upbraiding of the wrecker, and from such an outrageous action—she would have so considered it—she ever refrained. Rather she preferred to apply herself more strenuously to her literary work wherein she might not only absorb herself but be laying the foundation of a career which, in time, she trusted might resuscitate their diminished fortunes and ensure a regular competence.

Her most ambitious effort, at this period, was, as she described it when submitting it to her father in London, "a faint attempt to embalm the memory of the hero of Corunna." This,

we are given to understand, was written under "mamma's persuasions," although the writer considered it far above her powers. "I fancy I am more than usually dissatisfied," she goes on to write, "from the comparison I cannot avoid making between these and the exquisitely beautiful performance I have lately been engaged in examining," a kindly reference of course to Miss Rowden's work.

The poem is dated February 7, 1809, is entitled "To the Memory of Sir John Moore," and is signed "M. R. M." It consists of thirty-four lines, too long to quote here, but we cannot refrain from giving the concluding stanzas because, in view of subsequent events, they have a peculiar literary significance:—

"No tawdry, 'scutcheons hang around thy tomb,
No hired mourners wave the sabled plume,
No statues rise to mark the sacred spot,
No pealing organ swells the solemn note.
A hurried grave thy soldiers' hands prepare;
Thy soldiers' hands the mournful burthen bear;
The vaulted sky to earth's extremest verge
Thy canopy; the cannon's roar thy dirge!
Affections sorrows dew thy lowly bier,
And weeping Valour sanctifies the tear."

This, as we have shown, was written in 1809. On April 19, 1817, eight years later, there appeared in the *Newry Telegraph* (a small tri-weekly, published in Ulster), under the simple head of "Poetry," what Byron called "the most perfect ode in the language"—"The Burial of Sir John

Moore." This poem was variously ascribed to Byron, Campbell and a number of others, and it was not until the year 1823 that it became known that the real author was the late Rev. Charles Wolfe, the curate of Ballyclog, in Tyrone, who had just died of consumption at the early age of thirty-two. Under ordinary circumstances there could be nothing remarkable in the fact of a notable occurrence, such as the burial of a nation's hero, inspiring two poets, at different dates, to choose it as a theme. In this case it is, however, very singular that the hurried, rough burial of the hero should have resulted in phrases almost identical in thought if not in word, especially as it was almost impossible for Mr. Wolfe to have seen Miss Mitford's work. As a literary curiosity we subjoin the verses of Mr. Wolfe to which we refer:—

"Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
As his corpse to the rampart we hurried;
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot,
O'er the grave where our hero we buried.

We buried him darkly at dead of night,
The sods with our bayonets turning;
By the struggling moonbeams misty light
And the lantern dimly burning.

No useless coffin enclosed his breast,
Not in sheet nor in shroud we wound him;
But he lay like a warrior taking his rest
With his martial cloak around him.

* * *

But half of our heavy task was done
When the clock struck the hour for retiring;
And we heard the distant and random gun
That the foe was sullenly firing.

Slowly and sadly we laid him down,
From the field of his fame fresh and gory;
We carved not a line, and we raised not a stone—
But we left him alone with his glory."

Having given these two quotations we might properly leave the matter, but for another curious incident which occurred in 1852 when, being engaged in preparing for the press her *Recollections of a Literary Life*, Miss Mitford had her attention drawn to a French poem which she considered had either been translated from Mr. Wolfe's poem and applied to some other hero, or that Mr. Wolfe, seeing this French poem,[1] had translated it and applied it as an ode on the burial of Sir John Moore. As to which was the better poem of the two, she unhesitatingly declared in favour of the French.

[1] "Les Funerailles de Beaumanoir." Quoting this poem in his *Reliques*, Father Prout (Rev. Francis Mahony) says: "Nor is it necessary to add any translation of mine, the Rev. Mr. Wolfe having reproduced them on the occasion of Sir John Moore's falling at Corunna under similar circumstances."

CHAPTER IX

THE FIRST BOOK

MONSIEUR ST. QUINTIN'S venture as a schoolmaster was so successful that he was able, towards the close of the year 1808, to retire in favour of Miss Rowden, who continued to conduct the school with as much ability and spirit as had her predecessor. When matters were settled she invited Miss Mitford up to town to enjoy the sights and participate in a round of social functions. These were fully described in letters to her mother beginning on May 20, 1809, and ending on June 4. They tell of an "elegant dinner" to M. St. Quintin on the occasion of his birthday and of an inspection of Miss Linwood's exhibition, which consisted of copies, in needlework, from celebrated pictures of both ancient and modern masters. This exhibition was remarkable in every way and was extremely popular for a number of years. Miss Mitford describes it as having been fitted up at "a most immense expense; upwards of five thousand pounds. It is indeed very superb." The lighting and arrangement were so cleverly

carried out that visitors were frequently deceived and quite believed that they were gazing on original oil-paintings instead of needlework copies.

"I was at Hamlet's" [the jewellers] "yesterday with Fanny, and summoning to my aid all the philosophy of a literary lady, contrived to escape without purchasing anything—but it was a hard trial. The newest fashion is beautiful. Sets of precious stones of all colours, and even gold and diamonds intermixed—without the slightest order or regularity. The effect is charming, but the price is enormous." Like a moth at a candle-flame Miss Mitford hovered about Hamlet's once more and was, apparently, not philosophic enough to avoid the inevitable singeing, for in the next letter she confesses—"Alas! I boasted too soon about Hamlet's, and was seduced into spending half-a-guinea on a ruby clasp," a purchase which evidently gave her pleasure, for she wore this clasp on every possible occasion afterwards, and was always careful to see that it was fastened in position when she had her portrait painted.

Then there were more dinner-parties at the St. Quintin's and at Dr. Harness's, varied by visits to the Exhibition of Water Colours and to the Haymarket Theatre to see *A Cure for the Heartache* and *The Critic*.

"Yesterday we went to the play. Emery's acting was delightful. The 'gods' were so vociferous for the second act of *The Critic* that the

performers were obliged to cut off some of the exquisite dialogue in the first. What a delightful thing it would be to have a playhouse without galleries! These very people, who curtailed some of the finest writing in the English language, encored five stupid songs!"

Sunday afternoon found the party walking among the fashionables in Kensington Gardens, with the honour of an introduction to Lord Folkestone, "papa's friend," who was all affability. "The people absolutely stopped to look at him; and well they might; for, independent of his political exertions, the present race of young men are such a set of frights, that he, though not very handsome, might pass for an Apollo amongst them."

Miss Mitford was now in her twenty-second year and was, doubtless, being quizzed by mamma as to the state of her heart. The matter does not appear to have been a subject for serious contemplation with her; indeed the question of love she appears to have regarded with something like amused contempt. What she describes as "a most magnificent entertainment" was a ball at Mr. Brett's, at Brompton, to which she was invited, following a sumptuous repast at another house. The ball was most impressive. "There were five splendid rooms open in a suite, and upwards of three hundred people. The supper was most elegant; every delicacy of the season was in profusion; and the

chalked floors and Grecian lamps gave it the appearance of a fairy scene, which was still further heightened by the beautiful exotics which almost lined these beautiful apartments," all of which, they were told, had come from Mr. Brett's own hot-house and conservatory. Her partners were numerous, handsome, and also "elegant," but "I do assure you, dear mamma, I am still heart-whole; and I do not think I am in much danger from the attractions of Bertram Mitford"—her cousin, and a young man upon whom both the Doctor and Mrs. Mitford looked with considerable favour as a probable and very desirable son-in-law.[1]

For ourselves, after reading between the lines of Miss Mitford's life, we strongly suspect that if young William Harness had been able to overcome his prejudice against the Doctor, and proposed to his old playmate, he would have been accepted. "Mr. Harness was never married," says his friend and biographer, the Rev. A. G. L'Estrange, "but I have heard that there was some romance and disappointment in his early life. In speaking of celibacy, he was wont to say, 'There is always some story connected with it.'" Whether this romance and dis-

[1] Writing in 1818 to her friend, Mrs. Hofland, she jokingly refers to an American—"a sort of lover of mine some seven or eight years ago—and who, by the way, had the good luck to be drowned instead of married"; but in this she is scarcely to be taken seriously.

appointment was connected with Miss Mitford is a matter upon which we cannot speak with certainty, but we are prepared to assert, upon the first-hand authority of one who knew Miss Mitford most intimately and was in the closest relationship with her, that, after her father (who was always first), William Harness was the one man of her life—and this not merely because of their similarity of tastes and pursuits upon which marriage might have set a crown of greater value than either ever achieved, or could have achieved alone—the man to whom she regularly turned for sympathy and counsel in the years which followed her parents' death, and to whom her thoughts were constantly turning when her end was near.

Speaking generally, we shall find that whenever Miss Mitford writes of Love in her correspondence, she does so half-disparagingly, a matter of significance to all who recognize what dissemblers women are on such a topic! M. St. Quintin's birthday was, also, the birthday of his sister Victoire, who was at this time languishing for love of a fickle young man. "Victoire was in no spirits to enjoy it," wrote Miss Mitford. "Her lover has just gone into the country for six months without coming to any declaration. Of course it is all off; and she only heard this dismal news the night before. I doubt not but she will soon get over it, for she is quite accustomed to these sorts of disappoint-

ments." A week later the topic was again referred to. "'The winds and the waves,' says the sagacious Mr. Puff, 'are the established receptacles of the sighs and tears of unhappy lovers.' Now, my dear mamma, as there is little wind in this heated atmosphere, and as the muddy waters of the Thames would scarcely be purified by the crystal tears of all the gentle lovers in the metropolis, it would almost seem that my evil destiny has fixed on me to supply their place; for, from the staid and prudent lover of fifty, to the poor languishing maiden of twenty-five, I am the general confidante, and sighs and blushes, hopes and fears, are 'all poured into my faithful bosom.' It is inconceivable how that mischievous little urchin deadens all the faculties. Mary Mitford [her cousin] was bad enough, but even she was more rational than Victoire at this moment." Thus Miss Mitford on the love-affairs of others.

This London visit, which resulted, we are told, in "a total destruction of gloves and shoes, and no great good to my lilac gown," was brought to an end in a perfect whirl of festivities and sight-seeing. "As you and I do not deal in generalities," wrote Miss Mitford to her mother, "I will give you my account in detail. . . . On Friday evening I dined at the St. Quintin's, and we proceeded [to the Opera House] to take possession of our very excellent situation, a pit box near to the stage and next the Prince's. . . .

Young is an admirable actor; I greatly prefer him to Kemble, whom I had before seen in the same character (Zanga in *The Revenge*). His acting, indeed, is more in the style of our favourite Cooke, and he went through the whole of his most fatiguing character with a spirit which surprised every one. A curious circumstance happened—not one of the party was provided with that article, so essential to tragedy, yclept a handkerchief; and had not papa supplied the weeping beauties with this necessary appendage, they would have borne some resemblance to a collection of blurred schoolboys. To me, you know, this was of no consequence, for I never cry at a play; though few people, I believe, enter more warmly into its beauties. . . . The dancing of Vestris is indeed perfection. The 'poetry of motion' is exemplified in every movement, and his Apollo-like form excels any idea I had ever formed of manly grace. Angiolini is a very fine dancer, but her figure by no means equals Vestris's, and I had no eyes for her while he remained upon the stage. . . . It was one o'clock before we returned; and at ten the next morning Fanny and I set out to make our round of visits in a very handsome landau barouche." These visits are then described, and the hope expressed that she will meet Cobbett, a meeting to which she was looking forward. Continuing, she writes:—"To-morrow we go first to Bedlam; then to St. James' Street

to see the Court people ; and then I think I shall have had more than enough of sights and dissipation. You cannot imagine, my dearest mamma, how much I long to return home, and to tell you all the anecdotes I have picked up, and pet my poor deserted darlings. I would have given up any pleasure I have partaken here to have seen the dear bullfinches eat their first strawberries. Did I tell you that the high and mighty Countess D'Oyerhauser called on me immediately after her return from Bath ? She sets up for a *femme savante*, attends the blue-stocking meetings at Lady Cork's, and all the literary societies where she can find or make an entrance. She is, therefore, in raptures at finding a fresh poetess, and we are going there this evening. I must tell you a good trait of this literary lady, who can scarcely speak a word of English. She was to meet Scott on Tuesday, and wanted to borrow a *Marmion*, that she might have two or three lines to quote in the course of the evening."

Upon her return home Miss Mitford devoted herself assiduously to her literary work, polishing many of her earlier poems in preparation for a volume which it was proposed should be published early in the following year. Many of these had politics for their theme and were written in honour of the political friends of her father, such as Colonel Wardle, Cobbett and Fox, while others were devoted to portraying her love for flowers

and animals. To her father, still in London, and now to be found at the *Bath Hotel* in Arlington Street, was given the duty of arranging the volume for publication, and, taken altogether the little volume put both father and daughter in a great flurry. It was decided to call the volume *Miscellaneous Poems*, which settled, a discussion arose as to whom it should be dedicated. Various names were suggested to be at last discarded in favour of the Hon. William Herbert, the third son of the first Earl of Carnarvon, and afterwards Dean of Manchester. He was himself an author of distinction with a leaning to the poetry of Danish and Icelandic authors, some of whose works he had translated. At first the Doctor objected to certain adulatory poems addressed to himself, but the objections were promptly met with an entreaty that nothing should be curtailed or omitted. "I speak not only with the fondness of a daughter, but with the sensibility (call it irritability, if you like it better) of a poet, when I assure you that it will be impossible to omit any of the lines without destroying the effect of the whole, and there is no reason, none whatever, excepting *your extreme modesty*, why any part of them should be suppressed.

A few days later the poet wrote off in a frenzy of "excitement" because she could not compose the "advertisement" which it was usual to prefix to works of this kind—a sort of apology which

most people skipped and which might therefore be omitted without hurt to the volume. "It is usual," she urged, "for people to give some reasons for publishing, but I *cannot*, you know, for the best of all possible reasons—because I have none to give." The matter was eventually settled, to be followed by disputes as to the "quantity of verses" which the Doctor thought necessary to a proper sized volume. He was for asking the opinion of literary friends such as Campbell, but to this his daughter strongly objected. "If you had known your own mind respecting the quantity of poetry necessary for the volume, I should never have thought of writing this *immoral* production. As, however, I am by no means desirous of having it hawked about among your canting friends, I shall be much obliged to you to put your copy into the fire. You need not fear my destroying my own, for I think too well of it. . . . I am not angry with you, though extremely provoked at those canting Scotchmen. If any of my things are worth reading, I am sure that poor tale is; and who reads a volume of poems to glean moral axioms? So that there is nothing offensive to delicacy, or good taste, it is sufficient; and I never should think of writing a poem with a sermon tacked to its tail."

At length the volume was printed, at a cost of £59 for 500 copies. This work was entrusted to A. J. Valpy, the nephew of Dr. Valpy, who had just set up as a printer in London and required

immediate payment for the job. Both the author and her father thought the sum excessive, especially as it included an item of £4 for alterations which the printer called "Errata," much to Miss Mitford's annoyance, she claiming that they were misprints and not, therefore, chargeable to her. Much bickering ensued, and the young printer was separately threatened with a horse-whipping from the Doctor and with boxed ears from Miss Mitford.

The publication of this book afforded the Doctor a very good excuse for prolonging his stay in the metropolis, for he could now plead that his daughter's welfare as an author demanded it. That he did exert himself in her behalf is certain, for we find her sending him "ten thousand thanks for the management of the Reviews," although "I am sadly afraid of not being noticed in the *Edinburgh*, the volume is so trifling." This was followed by a further "ten thousand thanks for your attention to my commissions, and, above all, for the books," in which was included Crabbe's poem, *The Borough*, just published, and which drew from Miss Mitford the exuberant statement "it is a rich treat . . . with all the finish and accuracy of the Dutch painters," while, "in the midst of my delight, I feel a sort of unspeakable humiliation, much like what a farthing candle (if it could feel) would experience when the sun rises in all his glory and extinguishes its feeble rays." Miss Mitford was an impulsive

creature, and in three days' time, after she had had an opportunity of thoroughly digesting *The Borough*, she wrote:—"Crabbe's poem is too long and contains too gloomy a picture of the world. This is real life, perhaps; but a little poetical fairyland, something to love and admire, is absolutely necessary as a relief to the feelings, among his long list of follies and crimes. Excepting one poor girl weeping over the grave of her lover, there is not one chaste female through the whole book. This is shocking, is it not, my darling? I dare say he is some *crabbed* old bachelor, and deserves to be tossed in a blanket for his contempt of the sex." It was shocking of the critic too, for, ignoring her atrocious pun on the poet's name, she made a very bad guess in quoting him as a bachelor, seeing that, as was well known, he was not only a happy father, but very fond of the society of the ladies.

It is pleasant to note that the Hon. William Herbert accepted the Dedication of the volume, which drew from him an appreciation in verse composed of most flattering sentiments, in which he paid a tribute to not only Miss Mitford's ability as a poet, but to her political leanings, in describing which he contrived to include a compliment to her father. He also hinted that the fair writer would find a worthy subject for her pen in the recent British Expedition to Copenhagen, a subject about which much controversy raged. These verses were dated March 29,

1810, inscribed "To Miss Mitford," and began :—

"Fair nymph, my Arctic harp unstrung,
Mute on the favourite pine is hung;
No beam awakes the airy soul
Which o'er its chords wild warbling stole."

After much more in this strain, he concluded

"Thou tuneful maid, thy ardent song
Shall tell of Hafnia's bitter wrong:
My pen has force with magic word
To blast the fierce-consuming sword.
For not poetic fire alone
Is thine to warm a breast of stone;
But thou hast quaffed the purest rays
That round the patriot's forehead blaze."

This, of course, inspired a reply by return. It is dated March 31, 1810, and, after paying homage to "the gifted bard," Miss Mitford concluded with the modest lines :—

"For me—unskilful to prolong
The finely modulated song—
Whose simple lay spontaneous flows
As Nature charms, or feeling glows,
Wild, broken, artless as the strains
Of linnets on my native plains,
And timid as the startled dove,
Scared at each breeze that waves the grove;
Still may that trembling verse have power
To cheer the solitary hour,
Of Spring's life-giving beauties tell,
Or wake at friendship's call the spell.
Enough to bless my simple lays,
That music-loved Herbert deigned to praise."

In a letter to her father she confesses that although Mr. Herbert did her great honour in

thinking her adequate to deal with the Copenhagen subject, she had no faith in her powers to do so, adding, "And to tell you the truth (which I beg you will not tell him), I do not think I would write upon it even if I could. Cobbett would never forgive me for such an atrocious offence; and I would not offend him to please all the poets in the world."

The little volume was greeted very cordially by the reviewers and secured its author a good deal of compliment from her father's political friends when she occasionally ran up to town at this time to give her father the chance of showing her off. But while grateful to the reviewers, she took exception to some of the conclusions they drew from the political verses in the book. "How totally reviewers have mistaken matters," she wrote to her father, "in attributing my political fancies to you! They would have been more correct if they had asserted a directly contrary opinion; for Cobbett is your favourite because he is mine,"—a doubtful compliment to the father but quite characteristic of the daughter.

It was well that Miss Mitford had so much that was congenial and engrossing wherewith to occupy her at this time, for the shadow was again hovering over the home at Bertram House, and creditors were beginning to be unpleasant in their demands and threats. Hints of the existing state of things were conveyed to the

Doctor from time to time and must have caused great anxiety to Mrs. Mitford, who did not share her husband's and her daughter's optimism.

"Do not forget that, if the tax money be not paid early this week, you will be reported as a defaulter; and your friends the ministers would take great delight in popping you up." This was contained in a letter of March 17, 1810. A week later a letter addressed to the Doctor at the Mount Coffee House, states:—"A letter came from Thompson Martin this morning which, knowing the hand, mamma opened. It was to request you would let him take the choice of your pictures [in payment of taxes]. I wrote a note to say, generally, that you had been in town for the last two months, and were still there; but that you would probably return next week to attend the Grand Jury, and would undoubtedly take an early opportunity of calling upon him. Was not this right? You will collect from this that we have received a summons from the under-sheriff, which was given over the pale to William this morning." There is also, in a letter of May 10, 1810, a suggestion of further trouble of a pecuniary nature, although it is difficult to say to what it refers. "And now let me give you a little serious advice, my dear son and heir. If those people do not give you a secure *indemnity*, stir not a finger in this business. Let them 'go to the devil and shake themselves,' for I would not trust one of them with a basket

of biscuits to feed my dogs. They have no more honour between them all than you 'might put on the point of a knife, and not choke a daw withal,' so comfort yourself accordingly; treat them as you would lawyers or the king's ministers, or any other fraternity of known rogues and robbers."

No matter how optimistic Miss Mitford may have been, we cannot bring ourselves to believe that she was not harassed by the importunate creditors, or that her work did not suffer in consequence. One effect of it all was, of course, to make her re-double her efforts to write something which would bring money into the family coffers.

CHAPTER X

A YEAR OF ANXIETY

WHILE her first book was passing through the press, Miss Mitford paid a series of hurried visits to London, and it was during the course of one of these visits that she was introduced to a gentleman of wide sympathy and of great culture and ability. This was Sir William Elford, one of her father's friends, although the friendship was not of that character which would blind the one to the other's faults and failings. He was a Fellow of the Royal and Linnæan Societies, an exhibitor in the Royal Academy, and Recorder of Plymouth, for which borough he was representative in Parliament for a number of years. At the time of this introduction he was well over sixty, a man of an age therefore with whom Miss Mitford was not so likely to be reserved as with one of fewer years. As a result of this meeting a correspondence was started which continued for many years, during which time Sir William encouraged his young friend to write freely to him on any and every topic which interested her. It is a remarkable

and interesting correspondence, as the occasional extracts we propose to give will prove, although, when he came to bear his share in editing these letters, the Rev. William Harness spoke of them as possessing "hardly any merit but high, cold polish, all freshness of thought being lost in care about the expression"; and again, "I like all the letters to Sir W. Elford, which (except when she forgets whom she is writing to and is herself again) are in conventional English and almost vulgar in their endeavour to be something particularly good." Nevertheless, he confessed later "the letters improve as I go on. Even those to Sir W. Elford get easier and better, as she became less upon punctilio and more familiar with him; in fact, as—with all her asserted deference—she felt herself more and more his superior in intellect and information."

The first letter was dated London, May 26, 1810, and was addressed to Sir William Elford, Bart., Bickham, Plymouth.

"My dear Sir,—

"Your most kind but too flattering letter followed me here two days ago, and I gladly avail myself of your permission to express my heartfelt gratitude for the indulgence with which you have received the trifling volume I had the honour to send you.

"For the distinguished favour you mean to confer on me" [a present of a landscape painted

by himself], "I cannot sufficiently thank you. Highly valuable it will doubtless be in itself, and I shall consider it inestimable as a proof of your good opinion. Indeed, Sir William, your praise has made me very vain. It is impossible not to be elated by such approbation, however little I may have deserved it.

"Will you not think me an encroacher if, even while acknowledging one favour, I sue for another? Much as I have heard of your charming poetical talent, I have never seen any of your verses, and, if it be not too much to ask, I would implore you to send me at least a specimen. Forgive this request if you do not comply with it, and believe me, dear Sir, with great respect,

"Your obliged and grateful

"MARY RUSSELL MITFORD."

This was not a bad beginning, although the "high, cold polish" is unmistakable. Her request was at once complied with, and emboldened by her success Miss Mitford plunged forthwith into a series of literary discussions which ran, more or less steadily, throughout the whole of this lengthy correspondence. The second letter —a characteristic one—is particularly interesting because it touches on her taste and predilection for country sights and sounds and which found the fullest expression in the one notable work by which she is remembered.

"You are quite right in believing my fondness

for rural scenery to be sincere; and yet one is apt to fall into the prevailing cant upon those subjects. And I am generally so happy everywhere, that I was never quite sure of it myself, till, during the latter part of my stay in town, the sight of a rose, the fragrance of a honeysuckle, and even the trees in Kensington Gardens excited nothing but fruitless wishes for our own flowers and our own peaceful woodlands. Having ascertained the fact, I am unwilling to examine the motives; for I fear that indolence of mind and body would find a conspicuous place amongst them. There is no trouble or exertion in admiring a beautiful view, listening to a murmuring stream, or reading poetry under the shade of an old oak; and I am afraid that is why I love them so well.

"It is impossible to mention poetry without thinking of Walter Scott. It would be equally presumptuous in me either to praise or blame *The Lady of the Lake*; but I should like to have your opinion of that splendid and interesting production. Have you read a poem which is said to have excited the jealousy of our great modern minstrel, *The Fight of Falkirk*?" [by Miss Holford.] "I was delighted with the fire and genius which it displays, and was the more readily charmed, perhaps, as the author is a lady; which is, I hear, what most displeases Mr. Scott.

"I enclose you *Robert Jeffery's Lament*, altered

according to your suggestions. . . . This little poem is not inscribed to you, because I am presumptuous enough to hope that at some future period you will allow me to usher a book into the world under your auspices. A long poem is to me so formidable a task that I fear it will scarcely be completed by next year (it is now indeed hardly begun)—but when finished, I shall make a new demand upon your kindness, by submitting it to your criticism and correction. I am quite ashamed of this letter. A lady's pen, like her tongue, runs at a terrible rate when once set a-going."

Having inveigled Sir William into a discussion of Scott versus Miss Holford, the attack was renewed in a subsequent letter wherein the "extraordinary circumstance" is noted that "the *dénouement* of *Marmion* and that of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* both turn on the same discovery, a repetition which is wonderful in a man of so much genius, and the more so as the incident is, in itself, so stale, so like the foolish trick of a pantomime, that to have used it once was too often."

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the correspondents found themselves agreed as to the respective merits of Miss Edgeworth, Miss Baillie and Mrs. Opie, "three such women as have seldom adorned one age and one country" . . . although with regard to Miss Edgeworth "perhaps you will think that I betray a strange

want of taste when I confess that, much as I admire the polished satire and nice discrimination of character in the *Tales of Fashionable Life*, I prefer the homely pathos and plain morality of her *Popular Tales* to any part of her last publication."

At her father's suggestion Miss Mitford was now—the beginning of the year 1811—devoting herself to the production of the long poem which she mentioned in her second letter to Sir William Elford. Its subject was the incidents on Pitcairn Island following the Mutiny of the *Bounty*, which had been revealed in 1808 by Captain Folger. During the progress of its composition the Dedication to Sir William Elford was submitted to that gentleman for his approval, drawing from him the very kind and flattering request that it should be couched in less formal language; "he says that he perfectly comprehends the honour I have done him by my description; but that he wishes the insertion of some words to show that we are *friends*; for to be considered the friend of the writer of that poem appears to him a higher honour than any he could derive from the superiority of station implied in my mode of dedication." The matter was eventually settled to the satisfaction of all. Meanwhile as each canto of the work was completed it was submitted first to Sir William and then to Coleridge, both of whom took great pains in giving it a final touch of polish, especially the latter, who prepared it for the press.

The Doctor, still in London and now at 17, Great Russell Street, Covent Garden, concerned himself with arranging for a publisher. He had decided that Longmans should have the first refusal of the honour, but Miss Mitford rather favoured Mr. Murray because "he is reckoned a very liberal man, and a more respectable publisher we cannot have. I do not think Longman will purchase it; so, even if you have taken it there, it is probable Murray may buy it at last." Messrs. Rivington produced it eventually under the title of *Christina: or the Maid of the South Seas*, but not before there had been an angry outburst at Coleridge for deleting an Invocation to Walter Scott. Mrs. Mitford was particularly angry and attributed the action to "a mean, pitiful spirit of resentment to Mr. Scott" on Coleridge's part. "Were the poem mine," she continued with a vehemence quite unusual with her, "I would have braved any censure as to what he terms 'bad lines,' being convinced he would have thought them beautiful had they not contained a compliment to Walter Scott. If our treasure follows my advice, whenever she prints another poem she will suffer no one to correct the press but herself: it will save you infinite trouble, and be eventually of great advantage to her works. It is certainly a most extraordinary liberty Mr. C. has taken, and will, I hope, be the last he will attempt." Miss Mitford did not share her mother's indig-

nation, although, as she wrote in a postscript to the above letter, "mamma has played her part well. I did not think it had been in her. We seem to have changed characters: she abuses Mr. Coleridge, I defend him, though I must acknowledge I do not think he would have found so many bad lines in the Invocation had not the compliment to Walter Scott grated upon his mind. My only reason for lamenting the omission is that it makes the poem look like a pig with one ear; but it does not at all signify," which was quite true, for *Christina* enjoyed a considerable popularity both here and in America, where a call was made for several editions.

This success must have been very gratifying, although any pecuniary advantage it brought was immediately swallowed up in trying to discharge the family's obligations and to provide for present dire needs. The situation was indeed pitiful, especially for the two women, who were forced to appear before their friends with a smile at a time when their hearts were heavy and desolation and ruin seemed inevitable. A number of letters from Bertram House to Dr. Mitford in London, during the year 1811, give sufficient indication of the suffering they were enduring, and this at a time when Miss Mitford was exercising her mind in the production of a work the failure of which would have been a disaster. Under date January 21, 1811, she wrote: "Mr. Clissold and Thompson Martin

came here yesterday, my own darling, and both of them declared that you had allowed Thompson Martin to choose what he would of the pictures, excepting about a dozen which you had named to them; and I really believe they were right, though I did not tell them so. Nothing on earth could be more perfectly civil than they were; and Martin, to my great pleasure and astonishment, but to the great consternation of Clissold, fixed upon the landscape in the corner of the drawing-room, with a great tree and an ass, painted by Corbould, 1803. It had taken his fancy, he said; and, though less valuable than some of those you offered to him, yet, as he did not mean to sell it, he should prefer it to any other. I told him I would write you word what he said, and lauded the gods for the man's foolishness. I have heard you say fifty times that the piece was of no consequence; and, indeed, as it is by a living artist of no great repute, it is impossible that it should be of much value. Of course you will let him have it; and I wish you would write to inquire how it should be sent."

These pictures were being taken in liquidation of debts, an incident sufficient of itself to wound the pride of a woman like Mrs. Mitford. But, in addition to this, she found herself faced with the problem of dismissing servants and no money wherewith to settle up their arrears of wages. It was one of the few occasions on which her too gentle spirit rose in revolt.

Accompanying her daughter's letter she sent a note to her husband stating: "I shall depend on a little supply of cash to-morrow, to settle with Frank and Henry, as the few shillings I have left will not more than suffice for letters, and such trifles. As to the cause of our present difficulties, it avails not how they originated. The only question is, how they can be most speedily and effectually put an end to. I ask for no details, which you do not voluntarily choose to make. A forced confidence my whole soul would revolt at; and the pain it would give you to offer it would be far short of what I should suffer in receiving it." A dignified, yet tender rebuke, showing a remarkable forbearance in a woman so greatly wronged.

Still worse was to follow, for at the beginning of March Dr. Mitford was imprisoned for debt and only secured his release by means of the proceeds of a hastily-arranged sale in town of more of his pictures, augmented by a loan from St. Quintin. At the same time he was involved with Nathaniel Ogle, "more hurt at your silence than at your non-payment," and was experiencing difficulties in regard to certain land adjoining Bertram House for which he had long been negotiating—having paid a deposit—but a transaction which Lord Shrewsbury, the owner, hesitated to complete in view of the Doctor's unreliable position.

At length the anxiety became greater than

Mrs. Mitford could bear, and for a time she was prostrated.

"I am happy," wrote Miss Mitford, "that the speedy disposal of the pictures will enable you, as I hope it will, to settle this unpleasant affair. Once out of debt and settled in some quiet cottage, we shall all be well and happy again. But it must not be long delayed; for my dear mother must be spared a repetition of such shocks."

Even so, the Doctor gave the waiting women no information regarding the sale of the pictures or the condition of affairs until Mrs. Mitford reproved him for his neglect; but the reproof was softened in her next letter, for she says: "I know you were disappointed in the sale of the pictures. But, my love, if we have less wealth than we hoped, we shall not have the less affection; these clouds may blow over more happily than we have expected. We must not look for an exemption from all the ills incident to humanity, and we have many blessings still left us, the greatest of which is that darling child to whom our fondest hopes are directed."

Moved at last to desperate action, Dr. Mitford made an endeavour to sell Bertram House, with the intention of removing to some less pretentious dwelling, possibly in London. The property, described as an "Elegant Freehold Mansion and 42 Acres of Rich Land (with possession)," was put up for sale by auction at Messrs. Robins', The Piazza, Covent Garden, on June 22, 1811,

but apparently the reserve was not reached, and no sale was effected. Miss Mitford did her best to straighten out matters, and indeed showed uncommon aptitude for business in one whose whole education had been classical. To her father, then staying at "New Slaughter's Coffee House," she wrote on July 5, "The distressing intelligence conveyed in your letter, my best-beloved darling, was not totally unexpected. From the unpleasant reports respecting your affairs, I was prepared to fear it. When did a ruined man (and the belief is as bad as the reality) ever get half the value of the property which he is obliged to sell? Would that Monck" [a near neighbour] "had bought this place last autumn! At present the best we can do seems to me to be, to relinquish the purchase of Lord Shrewsbury's land, and (if it will be sufficient to clear us, mortgage and all) to sell all we have out of the funds, and with that, and Lord Bolton's legacy, and the money in Lord Shrewsbury's hands, and the sale of the books and furniture, clear off our debts and endeavour to let this house. If this can be done, and we can get from three to four hundred a year for it, we may live very comfortably; not in a public place, indeed, but in a Welsh or Cumberland cottage, or in small London lodgings. Where is the place in which, whilst we are all spared to each other, we should not be happy? For the sale of the money in the funds, or rather for Dr. Harness's consent to it, I think

I can be answerable. It will not, four years hence, be worth a guinea, and it would now nearly clear the mortgage, and we should retain our only *real* property. If the thousand pounds of Lord Bolton, the six hundred of Lord Shrewsbury, the three hundred at Overton, and the sale of stocks, books, crops and furniture will clear all the other debts, this may still be done. If not, we must take what we can get and confine ourselves to still humbler hopes and expectations. This scheme is the result of my deliberations. Tell me if you approve of it, and tell me, I implore you, my most beloved father, the full extent of your embarrassments. This is no time for false delicacy on either side. I dread no evil but suspense. I hope you know me well enough to be assured that, if I cannot relieve your sufferings, both pecuniary and mental, I will at least never add to them. Whatever those embarrassments may be, of one thing I am certain, that the world does not contain so proud, so happy, or so fond a daughter. I would not exchange my father, even though we toiled together for our daily bread, for any man on earth, though he could pour all the gold of Peru into my lap. Whilst we are together, we never can be wretched; and when all our debts are paid, we shall be happy. God bless you, my dearest and most beloved father. Pray take care of yourself, and do not give way to depression. I wish I had you here to comfort you."

The advertisement in the Reading papers, announcing the sale of Bertram House, was, of course, something in the nature of a surprise to the County folk, although, doubtless, some of them were sufficiently well-informed to know that the Mitfords were in trouble. "There is no news in this neighbourhood," wrote Miss Mitford to Sir William Elford, "excepting what we make ourselves by our intended removal; and truly I think our kind friends and acquaintances ought to be infinitely obliged to us for affording them a topic of such inexhaustible fertility. Deaths and marriages are nothing to it. There is, where they go? and why they go? and when they go? and how they go? and who will come? and when? and how? and what are they like? and how many in family? and more questions and answers, and conjectures, than could be uttered in an hour by three female tongues, or than I (though a very quick scribbler) could write in a week."

There was a very practical side to Miss Mitford's nature and, for a woman, a somewhat uncommon disregard for the conventions, a disregard which developed with her years. Consequently, what people thought or said affected her very little, and she devoted her mind rather to solving difficulties than to wringing her hands over them. That indolence of mind and body, of which she was self-accused, she conquered, and though domestic troubles were heaped about her, she set

to work on a new poem which was to be entitled *Blanch of Castile.*

To her father she wrote: "I wish to heaven anybody would give me some money! If I get none for *Blanch,* I shall give up the trade in despair. I must write *Blanch*—at least, begin to write it, soon. I wish you could beg, borrow, or steal (anything but buy) Southey's *Chronicle of the Cid,* and bring it down for me." . . . A week or so later she wrote: "I have now seven hundred lines written; can you sound any of the booksellers respecting it? I can promise that it shall be a far superior poem to *Christina,* and I think I can finish it by November. We ought to get something by it. It will have the advantage of a very interesting story, and a much greater variety of incident and character. I only hope it may be productive."

Throughout the letters of this period it is rather pathetic to notice the forced optimism of the writer, especially in those addressed to her father. Sandwiched between reports of progress with *Blanch* are the most insignificant details of home, of Marmion's prowess with a rabbit; of the *ci-devant* dairymaid Harriet, who, at the request of her admirer, William, had consented to leave her place at Michaelmas to share his fate and Mrs. Adams's cottage; of Mia's puppies, and of the pretty glow-worms which she would so love to show the errant one had she the felicity to have him by her side.

More than this, it is astounding to gather from her letters to Sir William Elford that she was keeping up her reading, expressing herself most decisively regarding Scott's new poems, the preference for which in Edinburgh she deems unlikely to extend southward; and then falling-to at Anna Seward's letters—The *Swan of Lichfield*—just published in six volumes and which she finds "affected, sentimental, and lackadaisical to the highest degree; and her taste is even worse than her execution. . . . According to my theory, letters should assimilate to the higher style of conversation, without the snip-snap of fashionable dialogue, and with more of the simple transcripts of natural feeling than the usage of good society would authorize. Playfulness is preferable to wit, and grace infinitely more desirable than precision. A little egotism, too, must be admitted; without it, a letter would stiffen into a treatise, and a billet assume the 'form and pressure' of an essay. I have often thought a fictitious correspondence (not a novel, observe) between two ladies or gentlemen, consisting of a little character, a little description, a little narrative, a little criticism, a very little sentiment and a great deal of playfulness, would be a very pleasing and attractive work: 'A very good article, sir' (to use the booksellers' language); 'one that would go off rapidly—pretty, light summer reading for the watering-places and the circulating

libraries.' If I had the slightest idea that I could induce you to undertake such a work by coaxing, by teasing, or by scolding, you should have no quarter from me till you had promised or produced it."

How light-hearted! And, moreover, how strangely prophetic was this promised success for the book written on the lines suggested, when we remember the unqualified welcome given to a delightful novel, a few seasons ago, which surely might have been made up from this very prescription. Had Mr. E. V. Lucas been delving in Mitfordiana, we wonder, or was *Listeners' Lure* but another instance of great minds thinking the same thoughts?

CHAPTER XI

LITERARY CRITICISM AND AN UNPRECEDENTED COMPLIMENT

"AS soon as I have finished *Blanch* to please myself, I have undertaken to write a tragedy to please Mr. Coleridge, whilst my poem goes to him, and to Southey and to Campbell. When it returns from them I shall, if he will permit me, again trouble my best and kindest critic to look over it. This will probably not be for some months, as I have yet two thousand lines to write, and I expect Mr. Coleridge to keep it six weeks at least before he looks at it." This extract is from one of Miss Mitford's letters to Sir William Elford, dated August 29, 1811, and it was not until exactly two months later that she was able to forward the finished poem for Sir William's criticism.

It was a production of which her father thought little at first, declaring that the title alone gave him the vapours. Her mother and the maid Lucy were half-blinded with tears when it was read to them, but then, as Miss Mitford remarked;

"they are so tender-hearted that I am afraid it is not a complete trial of my pathetic powers." In this case Sir William was the first to scan the lines, an arrangement due possibly to the stress of work then being engaged in by Coleridge and Campbell—the former with lectures on Poetry and the latter in the writing of his famous biographical prefaces to his collection of the poets. Eventually the book was produced in the December of 1812, news of which, apart from any other source, we glean from a letter of its author in which she says: "*Blanch* is out—out, and I have not sent her to you! The truth is, my dear Sir William, that there are situations in which it is a duty to give up all expensive luxuries, even the luxury of offering the little tribute of gratitude and friendship; and I had no means of restraining papa from scattering my worthless book all about to friends and foes, but by tying up my own hands from presenting any, except to two or three very near relations. I have told you all this because I am not ashamed of being poor, and because perfect frankness is in all cases the most pleasant as well as the most honourable to both parties."

It was fortunate that *Blanch* was finished, for just as it was on the point of completion, Miss Mitford was greatly excited over the prospect of collaborating with Fanny Rowden in the translation of a poem which would have given both a nice sum in return for their labours. Unfortu-

nately the project came to naught and the work was entrusted to a man.

From now, on to the close of the year 1815, there is no record of any work of Miss Mitford's, unless we except one or two odes and sonnets of which she said the first were "above her flight, requiring an eagle's wing," while of the latter she "held them in utter abhorrence." Her time really seems to have been taken up with an occasional visit to London and into Hampshire (where she inspected her old birthplace, Alresford); with short excursions into Oxfordshire (within an easy drive out and back from home), and largely with a voluminous correspondence, chiefly on literary topics, with Sir William Elford. Fortunately this correspondence was not wasted labour as she was able to embody a very large proportion of it in the *Recollections of a Literary Life*. Indeed, had she not specifically suggested the plan of that work many years later, we should feel justified in believing that, from the very outset, it was to such an end that her correspondence and literary criticism were directed.

Now that a century has passed since the letters were written, it is interesting to peruse her comments on such writers as Byron, Scott, Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, all of whom were publishing at that period. "I dislike *Childe Harold*," she wrote. "Not but that there are very many fine stanzas and powerful descriptions; but the sentiment is so strange, so gloomy,

so heartless, that it is impossible not to feel a mixture of pity and disgust, which all our admiration of the author's talents cannot overcome. I would rather be the poorest Greek whose fate he commiserates, than Lord Byron, if this poem be a true transcript of his feelings. Out of charity we must hope that his taste only is in fault, and that the young lordling imagines that there is something interesting in misery and misanthropy. I the readier believe this, as I am intimate with one of his lordship's most attached friends, and he gives him an excellent character." The "intimate friend" alluded to was William Harness who, from the Harrow schooldays onwards, was chief among Byron's friends; indeed, Byron expressly desired to dedicate *Childe Harold* to Harness, and only refrained "for fear it should injure him in his profession," Harness being then in Holy Orders while Byron's name was associated with orgies of dissipation, to be followed later by calumnious charges which Harness nobly did his best to refute.

It is a tribute to Miss Mitford's critical faculty that she found little difficulty in probing the mystery as to the authorship of *Waverley*, that "half French, half English, half Scotch, half Gaelic, half Latin, half Italian—that hotch-potch of languages—that movable Babel called *Waverley!*" as she termed it. "Have you read Walter Scott's *Waverley*?" she writes. "I have ventured to say 'Walter Scott's,' though I hear he

denies it, just as a young girl denies the imputation of a lover; but if there be any belief in internal evidence, it must be his. It is his by a thousand indications—by all the faults and by all the beauties—by the unspeakable and unrecollectable names—by the hanging the clever hero, and marrying the stupid one—by the praise (well deserved, certainly, for when had Scotland such a friend! but thrust in by the head and shoulders) of the late Lord Melville—by the sweet lyric poetry—by the perfect costume—by the excellent keeping of the picture—by the liveliness and gaiety of the dialogues—and last, not least, by the entire and admirable individuality of every character in the book, high as well as low—the life and soul which animates them all with a distinct existence, and brings them before our eyes like the portraits of Fielding and Cervantes."

She was, however, at fault over *Guy Mannering*, being thrown clear off the scent by Scott's cleverness in quoting a motto from his own *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, an act of which Miss Mitford evidently thought no author would be guilty: "he never could write *Guy Mannering*, I am sure—it is morally impossible!"

Pride and Prejudice and *Sense and Sensibility* she joined with others in ascribing to any but their real author, but when she learned that they were Miss Austen's she let her pen go with a vengeance.

"*A propos* to novels, I have discovered that our great favourite, Miss Austen, is my countrywoman; that mamma knew all her family very intimately; and that she herself is an old maid (I beg her pardon—I mean a young lady) with whom mamma before her marriage was acquainted. Mamma says that she was then the prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly she ever remembers; and a friend of mine, who visits her now, says that she has stiffened into the most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of 'single blessedness' that ever existed, and that, till *Pride and Prejudice* showed what a precious gem was hidden in that unbending case, she was no more regarded in society than a poker or a fire-screen, or any other thin or upright piece of wood or iron that fills its corner in peace and quietness. The case is very different now; she is still a poker—but a poker of whom every one is afraid." Fortunately this description was qualified: "After all, I do not know that I can quite vouch for this account," especially as the consensus of opinion regarding Miss Austen is entirely opposed to the above description.

Miss Edgeworth she found too cold and calculating as a writer: "I never can read Miss Edgeworth's works without finding the wonderful predominance of the head over the heart; all her personages are men and women; ay, and many of them very charming men and women;

but they are all of them men and women of the world. There is too much knowledge of life, too much hardness of character—too great a proneness to find bad motives for good actions, too great a contempt for that virtuous enthusiasm, which is the loveliest rose in the chaplet of youth; and, to say all in one word, I never take up her volumes myself without regretting that they were not written by a man; nor do I ever see a young girl reading them without lamenting that she will be let into the trick of life before her time."

Early in the year 1813 a letter was received from Mr. and Mrs. Perry, inviting Miss Mitford to stay with them at their house in Tavistock Square. Mr. Perry was then Editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, and the invitation was gladly accepted, not only because Perry was a friend of her father's, but because the latter had assured her that Tavistock House was the rendezvous for many of the leaders in the political and literary worlds. During this visit she met Mrs. Opie—"thinner, paler, and much older, but very kind and pleasant"—and Thomas Moore,—"that abridgement of all that is pleasant in man,"—with whom she had the "felicity" of dining frequently. "I am quite enchanted with him," she wrote. "He has got a little wife (whom I did not see) and two little children, and they are just gone into Wales,[1] where he intends

[1] Miss Mitford was wrong in this; Moore went to a cottage near Ashbourne, in Derbyshire.

to finish a great poem [*Lalla Rookh*] on which he is occupied. It is a Persian tale, and he says it will be his fault if it is not a fine work, for the images, the scenery, the subject, are poetry itself. How his imagination will revel among the roses, and the nightingales, and the light-footed Almé ! " Mr. Moore did not forget his little friend and, a year later, gave her the added pleasure of reading over a part of his manuscript, " and I hope in a few days to see the whole in print. He has sold it for three thousand pounds. The little I have seen is beyond all praise and price," she wrote enthusiastically. These visits to town were undoubtedly something more than mere pleasure jaunts, for it is quite apparent that they were undertaken with a view to keeping the name and person of Mary Russell Mitford well in the public mind and eye. Making her headquarters at 33, Hans Place, the residence of Fanny Rowden's mother, she spent a whirling fortnight during the summer of 1814, meanwhile keeping Mrs. Mitford well-informed on all details, however slight. Under date, June 16, 1814, she writes : " Yesterday, my own dearest Granny, was, I think, the most fatiguing morning I ever underwent. Stuffed into a conspicuous place, stared at, talked to, or talked at, by everybody, dying with heat, worn out with flattery, I really should have wished myself in heaven or somewhere worse, if I had not been comforted by William Harness, who sat behind me, laughing

at everybody, and more playful and agreeable than any one I ever remember." The occasion was the Midsummer Breaking-up performance at her old school, during which an ode she had composed for another function was recited.

"We had no exercises," she continued, "nothing but music and recitations, which lasted nearly four hours, and did them great credit. The *March of Mind* was well repeated, and received, of course, as verses commonly are in the presence of the authoress. I was to have presented the prizes; but to my great comfort Lady Caroline Lamb arrived, and I insisted on giving her my post." Then follow particulars of a carefully-planned programme of sight-seeing, finishing with:—"How little people in the country know of fashions! I see nothing but cottage bonnets trimmed with a double plaiting, and sometimes two double plaitings, and broad satin ribbon round the edge. Gowns with half a dozen breadths in them, up to the knees before, and scarcely decent behind, with triple flounces, and sleeves like a carter's frock, sometimes drawn, at about two inches distant, and sometimes not, which makes the arms look as big as Miss Taylor's body. I like none of this but the flouncing, which is very pretty, and I shall bring three or four yards of striped muslin to flounce my gowns and yours. Tell Mrs. Haw, with my love, to prepare for plenty of hemming and whipping, and not to steal my needles. . . . I have been to see Haydon's

picture, and I am enchanted. . . . I saw, too, in a print-shop, the beautiful print of 'Napoleon le Grand,' of which you know there were but three in England, and those not to be sold. Oh, that any good Christian would give me that picture!"

Napoleon Bonaparte was one of her heroes, and she could never bring herself to adopt the general view of him held by the populace in this country. Her friend M. St. Quintin wanted her to translate some epigrams which he had composed against the late Emperor: "Let Mr. St. Quintin know that he has brought his pigs to the wrong market," was her reply to her father, who had offered her the commission. "I am none of those who kick the dead lion. Let him take them to Lord Byron, or the editor of *The Times*, or the Poet Laureate, or the bellman, or any other official character. . . . I hate all these insults to a fallen foe."

Later, when the *Bellerophon* with Napoleon on board—then on his way to exile—put into Plymouth, Miss Mitford wrote to Sir William Elford: "Goodness! if I were in your place, I *would* see him! I would storm the *Bellerophon* rather than not get a sight of him, ay, and a talk with him too. You and I have agreed to differ respecting the Emperor, and so we do now in our thoughts and our reasonings, though not, I believe, much in our feelings; for your relenting is pretty much the same as my—(what shall I venture to call it?)—my partiality. . . . But though I cannot tell you exactly what I would do

with the great Napoleon, I can and will tell you what I would not do to him. I would not un-Emperor him—I would not separate him from his faithful followers—I would not ransack his baggage, as one would do by a thief suspected of carrying off stolen goods—I would not limit him to allowances of pocket-money to buy cakes and fruit like a great schoolboy—I would not send him to 'a rock in the middle of the sea,' like St. Helena."

But this is a digression. We left Miss Mitford in London describing the Hans Place celebrations. The next morning she was taken to the Freemasons' Tavern, in Great Queen Street, to attend the meeting of the Friends against the Slave Trade, where she heard such notables as Lords Grey and Holland, together with William Wilberforce and Lord Brougham.

"Lord Grey had all the Ogle hesitation, and my noble patron" [Holland, to whom her first book was dedicated] "has my habit of hackering so completely that he scarcely speaks three words without two stops; but when we can get at his meaning, it is better than any one's. My expectations were most disappointed in Brougham, and most surpassed in Wilberforce. I no longer wonder at the influence he holds over so large a portion of the 'religionists,' as he calls them; he is a most interesting and persuasive speaker."

The great day, however, was Friday, June 24, 1814, when the members of the British and

Foreign School Society dined together, at the Freemasons' Tavern, on the occasion of their anniversary meeting. The Marquis of Lansdowne was in the chair, supported by the Dukes of Kent and Sussex, the Earls of Darnley and Eardley, and several other eminent persons. Miss Mitford and a party of friends were in the gallery "to hear splendid speeches and superlative poetry, and to see—but, alas! not to share —super-excellent eating." Miss Mitford was always a great believer in, and supporter of all efforts which were made to facilitate the education of the people, and on this occasion her ode on *The March of Mind*, which she had specially composed for this event, was set to music and sung. "I did not believe my own ears when Lord Lansdowne, with his usual graceful eloquence, gave my health. I did not even believe it, when my old friend, the Duke of Kent, observing that Lord Lansdowne's voice was not always strong enough to penetrate the depths of that immense assembly, reiterated it with stentorian lungs. Still less did I believe my ears when it was drunk with 'three times three,' a flourish of drums and trumpets from the Duke of Kent's band, and the unanimous thundering and continued plaudits of five hundred people. . . . Everybody tells me such a compliment to a young untitled woman is absolutely unprecedented; and I am congratulated and be-praised by every soul who sees me."

This London visit, in Miss Mitford's twenty-seventh year, was an excellent piece of stage-management, and if it was due to the exertions of her father—and we may properly suppose it was—it stands as one achievement, at least, to his credit.

Home from these festivities, with the plaudits of the crowd and the congratulations of her friends still ringing in her ears, she had once again to face the problem of depleted coffers and how to set about the task of filling them. Each succeeding year there was trouble about the payment of taxes. "I do hope, my own dear love," runs one of the letters, "that you returned to London yesterday, and that you have been actively employed to-day in getting money for the taxes. If not, you must set about it immediately, or the things will certainly be sold Monday or Tuesday. There is nothing but resolution and activity can make amends for the time that has been wasted at Bocking." This last sentence alludes to the Doctor's absence in Northumberland attending to the complicated money matters of a relative. Just previous to this Mrs. Mitford had written: "After sending off our letter to you, yesterday, Farmer Smith came to tell me what a piece of work the parish made with him about our unpaid rates. They have badgered him most unmercifully about sending a summons and compelling payment, but he is most unwilling to take any step that might

be productive of uneasiness to you. . . . You will be astonished to hear that there is none of the farmers more outrageously violent than Mr. Taylor, who blusters and swears he will not pay his rates if they do not exact the immediate payment of yours." The rates due at this time were for two years—£46 8*s.* in all, for which the Doctor had paid £10 on account.

Later on there is a promise of other, though similar trouble, in a letter to the Doctor addressed in great haste to him, and to three different localities, as they were not sure of his whereabouts. "I am sorry to tell you, my dearest father, that Mr. Riley's clerk has just been here with a law-paper, utterly incomprehensible; but of which the intention is to inform you that, if the mortgage and interest be not paid *before next Monday*, a foreclosure and ejectment will immediately take place; indeed I am not sure whether this paper of jargon is not a sort of ejectment. We should have sent it to you but for the unfortunate circumstance of not knowing where you are. The clerk says you ought to write to Mr. Riley, and negotiate with him, and that if the interest had been paid, no trouble would have been given. Whether the interest will satisfy them now I cannot tell. No time must be lost in doing something, as next Monday some one will be put into possession."

What a sorry plight the mother and daughter must have been in! No wonder that we read the daughter's request for "a bottle of Russia

Oil, to cure my grey locks." And to make matters worse, there was pending a Chancery Suit in connection with the sale of Bertram House, which so soured the Doctor that he would have nothing done to the garden or grounds. The gravel was covered with moss, the turf lengthened into pasture, and the shrubberies into tangled thickets—a picture of desolation which only emphasized the misery of the financial outlook.

CHAPTER XII

DWINDLING FORTUNES AND A GLEAM OF SUCCESS

MISS MITFORD'S great and growing affection for the simple delights of the country is amply proved in some of the letters which she wrote to Sir William Elford during the years 1812–1815, and in the publication of her poems on *Watlington Hill* and *Weston Grove*. Of these two works *Watlington Hill* is, on the whole, in praise of coursing, although it also contains some fine descriptions of scenery which all who know the locality will recognize and appreciate. The piece was originally published as a separate poem and dedicated to "James Webb, Esq., and William Hayward, Esq.," two coursing friends of her father's, the last-named being the owner of the Watlington Farm which Dr. Mitford made his headquarters whenever a coursing meeting was in progress in the district. In this form it was published by A. J. Valpy, but later on was embodied in a volume entitled *Dramatic Scenes*, and published in 1827, by George B. Whittaker.

Weston Grove is a description of the place of that name, near Southampton Water, then the seat of William Chamberlayne, Esq., M.P.—

another friend of the Mitfords—to whom the poem was inscribed. Neither of these works had a great sale.

In addition to these Miss Mitford made, in 1813, an attempt to produce a play entitled *The King of Poland*, concerning which she wrote to her father that "it will be in five acts instead of three, and runs much more risk of being too long than too short. My favourite character is a little saucy page . . . and who is, I think, almost a new character on the English stage. We have, it is true, pages in abundance, but then they commonly turn out to be love-lorn damsels in disguise. Now mine is a *bona-fide* boy during the whole play."

Late in the year 1815 we find her telling Sir William Elford that she has "been teased by booksellers and managers, and infinitely more by papa, for a novel and a play; but, alas! I have been obliged to refuse because I can only write in rhyme. My prose—when I take pains, is stiffer than Kemble's acting, or an old maid's person, or Pope's letters, or a maypole—when I do not, it is the indescribable farrago which has at this moment the honour of saluting your eyes. This is really very provoking, because I once—ages ago—wrote four or five chapters of a novel, which were tolerably lively and entertaining, and would have passed very well in the herd, had they not been so dreadfully deficient in polish and elegance. Now it so happens that

of all other qualities this unattainable one of elegance is that which I most admire and would rather possess than any other in the whole catalogue of literary merits. I would give a whole pound of fancy (and fancy weighs light), for one ounce of polish (and polish weighs heavy). To be tall, pale, thin, to have dark eyes and write gracefully in prose, is my ambition; and when I am tall, and pale, and thin, and have dark eyes, then, and not till then, will my prose be graceful."

In this outline of qualifications for the writing of graceful prose Miss Mitford did herself scant justice, as time has proved; for while her verse is forgotten, it is her prose alone which has lived and by which she is remembered. Had personal bulk been the deciding factor, then, assuredly she would have been ruled out, for in a previous letter to Sir William—with whom, by the way, she was now on such intimate terms that personal matters of this sort were freely discussed—she had informed him of the "deplorable increase of my beautiful person. Papa talks of taking down the doors, and widening the chairs, and new hanging the five-barred gates, and plagues me so, that any one but myself would get thin with fretting. But I can't fret; I only laugh, and that makes it worse. I beg you will get a recipe for *diminishing people*, and I will follow it; provided always it be not to get up early, or to ride on horseback, or to dance all night, or to drink vinegar, or to cry, or to be '*lady-like* and melan-

choly,' or not to eat, or laugh, or sit, or do what I like; because all these prescriptions have already been delivered by divers old women of both sexes, and constantly rejected by their contumacious patient." And this she supplemented by likening herself to "a dumpling of a person tumbling about like a cricket ball on uneven ground, or a bowl rolling among ninepins."

Of her prose, we shall find that her earliest descriptive pieces were contained in the letters sent to Sir William and, although they may lack the grace of the later finished work written for publication, they do, at least, prove their author's possession of "the seeing eye."

"I am just returned from one of those field rambles which in the first balmy days of spring are so enchanting. And yet the meadows, in which I have been walking, are nothing less than picturesque. To a painter they would offer no attraction—to a poet they would want none. Read and judge for yourself in both capacities. It is a meadow, or rather a long string of meadows, irregularly divided by a shallow, winding stream, swollen by the late rains to unusual beauty, and bounded on the one side by a ragged copse, of which the outline is perpetually broken by sheep walks and more beaten paths, which here and there admit a glimpse of low white cottages, and on the other by tall hedgerows, abounding in timber, and strewn like a carpet

with white violets, primroses, and oxlips. Except that occasionally over the simple gates you catch a view of the soft and woody valleys, the village churches and the fine seats which distinguish this part of Berkshire, excepting this short and unfrequent peep at the world, you seem quite shut into these smiling meads.

"Oh, how beautiful they were to-day, with all their train of callow goslings and frisking lambs, and laughing children chasing the butterflies that floated like animated flowers in the air, or hunting for birds' nests among the golden-blossomed furze! How full of fragrance and of melody! It is when walking in such scenes, listening to the mingled notes of a thousand birds, and inhaling the mingled perfume of a thousand flowers, that I feel the real joy of existence. To live; to share with the birds and the insects the delights of this beautiful world; to have the mere consciousness of *being*, is happiness."

That was her picture of Spring. She improved as the year rolled on, and the next January gave play for her pen in a description of hoar-frost.

"A world formed of something much whiter than ivory—as white, indeed, as snow—but carved with a delicacy, a lightness, a precision to which the massy, ungraceful, tottering snow could never pretend. Rime was the architect; every tree, every shrub, every blade of grass was clothed with its pure incrustations; but

so thinly, so delicately clothed, that every twig, every fibre, every ramification remained perfect; alike indeed in colour, but displaying in form to the fullest extent the endless, infinite variety of nature. This diversity of form never appeared so striking as when all the difference of colour was at an end—never so lovely as when breaking with its soft yet well-defined outline on a sky rather grey than blue. It was a scene which really defies description."

It was during this period, notably in 1812, that Miss Mitford must, metaphorically speaking, have begun "to feel her feet" in literary matters. The adulation of her father's friends in London, backed up by the reviews, which were, generally, favourable to her work, were sufficient proof that she had a public and that, in time, she might hope to secure something like a regular and even handsome income from her pen. In this she was encouraged by Sir William Elford, who did all that was possible to impress upon her the necessity for studied and polished work. To this end he informed her that he was carefully saving her letters, playfully hinting that they might prove valuable some day. This may account for the "high, cold, polish" which William Harness deprecated. The hint was not lost on her and drew from her an amusing and, as events have proved, prophetic reply: "I am highly flattered, my dear Sir William, to find that you think my letters worth preserving. I

keep yours as choice as the monks were wont to keep the relics of their saints; and about sixty years hence your grandson or great grandson will discover in the family archives some notice of such a collection, and will send to the grandson of my dear cousin Mary (for as I intend to die an old maid, I shall make her heiress to all my property, i.e. my MSS.) for these inestimable remains of his venerable ancestor. And then, you know, my letters will be rummaged out, and the whole correspondence be sorted and transcribed, and sent to the press, adorned with portraits, and *facsimiles*, and illustrated by lives of the authors, beginning with the register of their birth, and ending with their epitaphs. Then it will come forth into the world, and set all the men a-crowing and talking over their old nonsense (with more show of reason, however, than ordinary) about the superiority of the sex. What a fine job the transcriber of my letters will have! I hope the booksellers of those days will be liberal and allow the poor man a good price for his trouble; no one but an unraveller of state cyphers can possibly accomplish it,"—this in allusion to the occasional illegibility of her handwriting which elsewhere she described as "hieroglyphics, which the most expert expounders of manuscripts fail to decipher."

Reference to her manuscripts recalls the trouble some of them entailed on young Valpy, the

printer—really a long-suffering and estimable young man—and his staff. For a writer so fully aware of her shortcomings in this matter, as was Miss Mitford, she was extraordinarily impatient and exacting. Poor Valpy did his best according to his lights—and these were not inconsiderable—and was more than usually anxious in the setting-up of Miss Mitford's work, seeing that, as she remarked in one of her letters, he had "dandled me as an infant, romped with me as a child, and danced with me as a young woman," but by reason of which, she unkindly concluded, he "finds it quite impossible to treat me or my works with the respect due to authorship."

Judging by the hundreds of Miss Mitford's letters which we have handled, full of closely-written and often indecipherable characters, we are of opinion that she was singularly fortunate in finding a printer able and willing to ascertain their meaning. Her condolences with her friend, Sir William, on his "press-correcting miseries" are, though extravagant, very diverting and, in these days of trade-unionism, throw an interesting light on the *personnel* of Valpy's little establishment in Tooke's Court. "I am well entitled to condole with you, for I have often suffered the same calamity. It is true that my little fop of a learned printer has in his employ *three* regularly-bred Oxonians, who, rather than starve as curates, condescend to marshal commas and colons, and the little magical signs which

make the twenty-four letters, as compositors; and it is likewise true, that the aforesaid little fop sayeth—nay, I am not sure that he doth not swear—that he always gives my works to his *best hands*. Now, as it is not mannerly for a lady to say 'you fib,' I never contradict this assertion, but content myself with affirming that it is morally impossible that the aforesaid hands can have that connection with a head which is commonly found to subsist between those useful members. Some great man or other—Erasmus, I believe—says that 'Composing is Heaven, preparing for publication Purgatory, and correcting for the press'—what, must not be mentioned to 'ears polite.' And truly, in my mind, the man was right. From these disasters I have, however, gained something:—'Sweet are the uses of adversity'; and my misfortunes have supplied me with an inexhaustible fund of small charity towards my unfortunate brethren, the mal-printed authors. For, whereas I used to be a most desperate and formidable critic on plural or singular, definite and indefinite, commas and capitals, interrogations and apostrophes, I have now learnt to lay all blunders to the score of the compositor, and even carry my Christian benevolence so far that, if I meet with divers pages of stark, staring nonsense (and really one does meet with such sometimes), instead of crying, 'What a fool this man must be—I'll read no more of his writing!' I only say, 'How unlucky

this man has been in a compositor! I can't possibly read him until he changes his printer.' " Nevertheless, and although there might be an occasional author glad to shelter himself behind such an excuse, the fact remains that the work which emanated from Valpy's press is entitled to the highest encomiums—despite his three Oxonians who, choosing the better part, preferred to compose type rather than sermons.

There is no record that Miss Mitford published anything from the year 1812—when *Watlington Hill* appeared—until 1819, the interval being occupied with various short trips to London, most of which were, however, only undertaken at the urgent request of friends who were keen on offering hospitality and entertainment. But for this hospitality and the assurance that the visits would entail little or no expense, it is evident that they could not have been indulged in. The Chancery suit still dragged its weary length along and the Doctor continued his lengthy jaunts to town, each trip being followed by the infliction of fresh privation on his wife and daughter. The large retinue of servants which had been installed when the family took possession of Bertram House, had dwindled gradually, until at last it was represented by one, or, at most, two. There was no lady's maid, and the footman had been replaced by a village lad who, when not waiting at table, had to make himself useful in the garden or stable—the jobs he was

really only fitted for. The carriage-horses had gone and were replaced by animals which could be commandeered for farm-work; the result being that, as they were oftenest on the farm, they were rarely available for use in the carriage, thus curtailing the pleasure of the ladies, both of whom greatly enjoyed this form of exercise. Finally, when the carriage required to be repaired and painted, it was found that there was no money in hand, so it was sold and never replaced.

Mrs. Mitford had the greatest difficulty in getting sufficient housekeeping money wherewith to meet their quite modest expenses, until at last the tradesmen refused to supply goods unless previous accounts were settled and ready money paid for the goods then ordered. They were really in the most desperate straits for money—the daughter actually contemplated the opening of a shop—and in one letter we are told that Mrs. Mitford begged her husband to send her a one-pound note, as they were in need of bread! This represented actual want, and yet, through it all, there was scarcely any diminution in the kennel, the occupants of which were a source of the greatest anxiety to Mrs. Mitford, who frequently did not know whither to turn in order to obtain food for them.

In perusing the letters which were written to the various friends of the family during this period, it is astonishing to find little or no evi-

dence of the distress under which the writer suffered. Miss Mitford's optimism was remarkable, whilst her belief in her father was so strong that even when she found that their miserable condition was due to his losses at the gaming-tables, she only commiserated him and blamed others for cheating and wronging so admirable a man, an attitude of mind which her mother shared!

It was towards the end of the year 1818 that she seriously thought of turning her attention to prose, encouraged by Sir William Elford, who had been struck by her descriptions of the neighbourhood in which she lived. She conceived the idea of writing short sketches illustrative of country scenes and manners, and when she had executed a few of these to her own and mamma's satisfaction, they were submitted to Thomas Campbell as possible contributions to the *New Monthly Magazine*, of which he was then the Editor. He would have nothing to do with them, nor did he encourage the writer to try them elsewhere. Nothing daunted, she offered them to one or two other Editors, but still met with refusal until she tried the *Lady's Magazine*, the editor of which had the good sense not only to accept them but asked for more. The result to the magazine was that its circulation went up by leaps and bounds, and the name of Mary Russell Mitford, hitherto known only to a limited circle, became almost a household word.

CHAPTER XIII

LITERARY FRIENDS AND LAST DAYS AT BERTRAM HOUSE

"WHAT have you been doing, my dear friend, this beautiful autumn?" wrote Miss Mitford to Sir William Elford, towards the end of 1817. "Farming? Shooting? Painting? I have been hearing and seeing a good deal of pictures lately, for we have had down at Reading Mr. Hofland, an artist whom I admire very much (am I right?), and his wife, whom, as a woman and an authoress, I equally love and admire. It was that notable fool, His Grace of Marlborough, who imported these delightful people into our Bœotian town. He—the possessor of Blenheim—is employing Mr. Hofland to take views at Whiteknights—where there are no views; and Mrs. Hofland to write a description of Whiteknights—where there is nothing to describe.[1] I have been a great deal with them

[1] Unfortunately they never received payment for this work, which was left on their hands, and resulted in a heavy loss.

and have helped Mrs. Hofland to one page of her imperial quarto volume; and to make amends for flattering the scenery in verse, I comfort myself by abusing it in prose to whoever will listen." The Hoflands were an interesting couple, and Mrs. Hofland, in particular, became one of Miss Mitford's dearest friends and most regular correspondents. She was already an author of some repute and an extremely prolific writer. In the year 1812 she wrote and published some five works, including *The Son of a Genius*, which had a considerable vogue. Previous to her marriage with Hofland she had been married to a Mr. Hoole, a merchant of Sheffield, who died two years after their marriage, leaving her with an infant four months old and a goodly provision in funds invested. Owing to the failure of the firm which was handling her money, she was left on the verge of poverty and had a bitter struggle to secure enough to live upon. A volume of poems which she published in 1805 brought her a little capital, with which she was enabled to open a boarding-school at Harrogate; but in this venture she failed, and then took to writing for a living. In 1808 she married Mr. Hofland, an event which crowned her troubles for, although outwardly there was no sign of it, there is every certainty that the overbearing selfishness of Hofland and his lack of consideration for any but himself, made their home-life almost unendurable. It will, therefore, be understood

why so much sympathy came to exist between Miss Mitford and her friend, seeing that they were both suffering from an almost similar trouble, although the matter was seldom mentioned between them.

Mrs. Hofland was an extremely pious woman, and she was also something of a busybody, though possibly one whose interest in the affairs of others was never unpleasant enough to cause trouble. Hearing of the Elford correspondence, she twitted Miss Mitford with having matrimonial designs in that quarter, which drew from the latter the clever retort: "The man is too wise; he has an outrageous fancy for my letters (no great proof of wisdom that, you'll say), and marrying a favourite correspondent would be something like killing the goose with the golden eggs."

Another of the notables who came prominently into Miss Mitford's life at this period was young Thomas Noon Talfourd, the son of a Reading brewer. He had been educated at the Reading Grammar School under Dr. Valpy, and "began to display his genius by publishing a volume of most stupid poems before he was sixteen." The description is, of course, Miss Mitford's. Nevertheless, he who wrote such detestable poetry, "wrote and talked the most exquisite prose." Upon leaving school he was sent "to Mr. Chitty a-special-pleading; and now he has left Mr Chitty and is special pleading for himself—work-

ing under the Bar, as the lawyers call it, for a year or two, when he will be called; and I hope, for the credit of my judgment, shine forth like the sun from behind a cloud. You should know that he has the very great advantage of having nothing to depend on but his own talents and industry; and those talents are, I assure you, of the very highest order. I know nothing so eloquent as his conversation, so powerful, so full; passing with equal ease from the plainest detail to the loftiest and most sustained flights of imagination; heaping with unrivalled fluency of words and of ideas, image upon image and illustration upon illustration. Never was conversation so dazzling, so glittering. Listening to Mr. Talfourd is like looking at the sun; it makes one's mind ache with excessive brilliancy."

Miss Mitford's prophecy as to Talfourd's future was more than fulfilled, and he came, at length, not only to illumine the legal profession but to shed a considerable lustre on literature and the drama.

A year or two after the writing of the eulogy just quoted, Talfourd was in Reading in a professional capacity and caused a mild sensation by his masterly and eloquent pleading. Miss Mitford went, with her father, to hear him, and was so moved that she wrote the following sonnet :—

"ON HEARING MR. TALFOURD PLEAD IN THE ASSIZE-HALL AT READING, ON HIS FIRST CIRCUIT,

March, 1821.

Wherefore the stir? 'Tis but a common cause
Of cottage plunder: yet in every eye
Sits expectation; —murmuring whispers fly
Along the crowded court; —and then a pause;—
And then a clear, crisp voice invokes the laws,
With such a full and rapid mastery
Of sound and sense, such nice propriety,
Such pure and perfect taste, that scarce the applause
Can be to low triumphant words chained down
Or more triumphant smiles. Yes, this is he,
The young and eloquent spirit, whose renown
Makes proud his birth place! a high destiny
Is his; to climb to honour's palmy crown
By the strait path of truth and honesty."

During the year 1817, Sir William Elford lost his wife. She was a most estimable woman, and although her husband had, occasionally, called on the Mitfords—turning aside, for that purpose, from the main road which ran through Reading—in his journeys from the west to London, she had never made their acquaintance and only knew of them by repute and what she gathered from the voluminous correspondence which passed between her husband and his literary friend. News of this lady's death drew from Miss Mitford a charming letter of condolence which must have proved to Sir William how large a place he held in her thoughts: "Your very touching letter, my dear friend, brought me the first intelligence of the dreadful loss you have experi-

enced. I had not even any idea of danger, or surely, most surely, I should never have intruded on you those letters whose apparently heartless levity I am now shocked to remember. I write now, partly in persuance of your own excellent system, to avoid, as much as may be, prolonging and renewing your sorrow, and partly to assure you of our sincere and unaffected sympathy. We had not, indeed, the happiness of a personal acquaintance with Lady Elford, but the virtues of the departed are best known in the grief of the survivors. To be so lamented is to have been most excellent. And the recollected virtue, which is now agony, will soon be consolation. God bless and comfort you all!

"I hope soon to hear a better account both of yourself and your daughters; but do not think of writing out of form or etiquette. Write when you will, and what you will, certain that few, very few, can be more interested in your health or happiness than your poor little friend."

From this date the correspondence between the two underwent a considerable change in tone and feeling. It became less stilted, suggesting to the unbiassed reader the idea that the existence of Lady Elford had, hitherto, forced the young person at Bertram House to mind her P's and Q's, "which I detest having to do." She may, possibly, have adopted this freer style of writing in the hope of diverting Sir William from thinking of his bereavement. In any case the happier

style of writing thus begun was never abandoned, and the consequence was that, thereafter, they contained more of that life and spirit which her friend Harness thought so characteristic of her writings when she let her words drop without any premeditation, at the prompting of her emotions.

"I have lately heard a curious anecdote of Mr. Coleridge," she writes, "which, at the risk —at the certainty—of spoiling it in the telling, I cannot forbear sending you. He had for some time relinquished his English mode of intoxication by brandy and water for the Turkish fashion of intoxication by opium; but at length the earnest remonstrance of his friends, aided by his own sense of right, prevailed on him to attempt to conquer this destructive habit. He put himself under watch and ward; went to lodge at an apothecary's at Highgate, whom he cautioned to lock up his opiates; gave his money to a friend to keep; and desired his druggist not to trust him. For some days all went on well. Our poet was ready to hang himself; could not write, could not eat, could not—incredible as it may seem—could not talk. The stimulus was wanting, and the apothecary contented. Suddenly, however, he began to mend; he wrote, he read, he talked, he harangued; Coleridge was himself again! And the apothecary began to watch within doors and without. The next day the culprit was detected; for the next day came

a second supply of laudanum from Murray's, well wrapped up in proof sheets of the *Quarterly Review*."

As a foil to this she tells, in the next letter, a story of Haydon the painter—poor, embittered disappointed Haydon, who, later, killed himself —which she had just heard from Mrs. Hofland. "He was engaged to spend the day at Hampstead, one Sunday, with some of the cleverest unbelievers of the age . . . and being reproached with coming so late, said with his usual simplicity, 'I could not come sooner—I have been to church.' You may imagine the torrent of ridicule that was raised upon him. When it had subsided, 'I'll tell ye what, gentlemen,' said he, 'I knew when I came amongst ye—and knowing this it is not, perhaps, much to my credit that I came—that I was the only Christian of the party; but I think you know that I will not bear insult, and I now tell you all that I shall look upon it as a personal affront if ever this subject be mentioned by you in my hearing; and now to literature, or what you will!'"

During 1818 Miss Mitford paid another short visit to the Perrys at Tavistock House in Tavistock Square, evidently arranged with the idea of keeping their young friend well before the public. "The party to-day consists of the Duke of Sussex, Lord Erskine, and some more. I don't want to dine with them and most sincerely hope we shall not, for there is no one of literary note;

but I am afraid we shall not be able to get off." They did not get off, and Miss Mitford "had the honour of being handed into the dining-room by that royal porpoise, the Duke of Sussex, who complained much of want of appetite, but partook of nearly every dish on the table." Concerning this lack of appetite, she subsequently wrote to Sir William Elford: "Never surely did man eat, drink, or swear so much, or talk such bad English. He is a fine exemplification of the difference between speaking and talking; for his speeches, except that they are mouthy and wordy and commonplace, and entirely without ideas, are really not much amiss." While on this visit she must have heard from some candid friend of Mr. Perry's the following story of Hazlitt's revenge and, later, detailed it with great delight —for she dearly loved a joke, even at the expense of her friends.

Hazlitt had been contributing a series of articles, on the English Stage, to various newspapers, particularly to the *Morning Chronicle*, of which, it will be remembered, Perry was the Editor. Unfortunately Hazlitt's "copy" came pouring in at the very height of the advertisement season, much to Perry's disgust, who used "to execrate the d—d fellow's d—d stuff." But it was good "copy," although the Editor had no idea that its writer was a man of genius, and having "hired him as you'd hire your footman, turned him off with as little or less cere-

mony than you would use in discharging the aforesaid worthy personage," because he wrote a masterly but damaging critique on Sir Thomas Lawrence, one of Perry's friends. "Last winter, when his *Characters of Shakespeare* and his lectures had brought him into fashion, Mr. Perry remembered him as an old acquaintance and asked him to dinner, and a large party to meet him, to hear him talk, and show him off as the lion of the day. The lion came—smiled and bowed—handed Miss Bentley to the dining-room —asked Miss Perry to take wine—said once 'Yes' and twice 'No'—and never uttered another word the whole evening. The most provoking part of this scene was, that he was gracious and polite past all expression—a perfect pattern of mute elegance—a silent Lord Chesterfield; and his unlucky host had the misfortune to be very thoroughly enraged without anything to complain of."

Reading was a place of great excitement during the year 1818, the resignation of the Member, Sir John Simeon, necessitating a general election. This brought Dr. Mitford back from Town posthaste, for he counted electioneering among his special delights, as we have previously noted. The occasion furnishes us with one of the few recorded instances of Mrs. Mitford shaking herself free from the cares of the household in order to be with and carefully watch her haphazard spouse. "Papa is going to stay in Reading the

whole election, and mamma is going to take care of him. Very good in her, isn't it? But papa does not seem to me at all grateful for this kind resolution, and mutters—when she is quite out of hearing—something about 'petticoat government.'"

The candidate was Fyshe Palmer, who not only won the election but continued in the representation of Reading for eighteen years. "He is," wrote Miss Mitford, "vastly like a mop-stick, or rather, a tall hop-pole, or an extremely long fishing-rod, or anything that is all length and no substance; three or four yards of brown thread would be as like him as anything, if one could contrive to make it stand upright. He and papa were riding through the town together, and one of the voters cried out, 'Fish and Flesh for ever!' Wit is privileged just now."

Mr. Palmer's wife was the Lady Madelina, a daughter of the Duke of Gordon, and she and Miss Mitford became very good friends. Miss Mitford's anxiety for Palmer's success was due not so much because of his politics as for the promise he had given her of following in the footsteps of his predecessor and keeping her well supplied with "franks," if elected. His promise he, doubtless, intended to keep, but as Miss Mitford despairingly wrote: "he has the worst fault a franker can have: he is un-come-at-able. One never knows where to catch him. I don't believe he is ever two days in a place—always

jiggeting about from one great house to another. And such strides as he takes, too! Oh! for the good days of poor Sir John Simeon! He was the franker for me! Stationary as Southampton Buildings, solid as the doorpost, and legible as the letters on the brass-plate! I shall never see his fellow."

Some time after the election, when, indeed, it was a thing forgotten, Dr. Valpy, the head-master of the Grammar School, decided to have a Greek play performed by the boys, and to this function the Mitfords were invited. The play was the *Hercules Furens* of Euripides and, of course, Miss Mitford made fun of the whole performance, especially of the last scene when, to slow music, the curtain dropped on "Theseus and Hercules in the midst of a hug which assuredly no Greek poet, painter or sculptor ever dreamt of. That hug was purely Readingtonian—conceived, born and bred in the Forbury." However, the play was well received and became an annual fixture, with Miss Mitford as the official reporter or, as she put it, the "official puffer for the Reading paper."

The year was also notable for the arrival in Reading of Henry Hart Milman as Vicar of St. Mary's, and of the Duke of Wellington, who came in order to look over Strathfieldsaye, Lord Rivers' estate, some distance beyond that of the Mitfords along the Basingstoke Road, which the Nation proposed he should accept as a tribute of

its gratitude. "His Grace comes to look at it sometimes," wrote Miss Mitford, "and whirls back the same day. He is a terrible horse-killer."

Towards the close of the year 1819 the Chancery suit came to an end. Mr. Elliott—the Doctor's opponent and a Bond Street upholsterer—visited Bertram House, saw Dr. Mitford, had a straight talk with him and, as Miss Mitford recorded, "this long affair of eight years was settled in eight minutes."

With the settlement an accomplished fact, the Mitfords began to look about for an abode of humbler pretentions. London was suggested and promptly vetoed, as was also the idea of settling in Reading. Finally they selected a cottage at Three-Mile-Cross, situated by the side of the Basingstoke Road and distant about a mile from their old home. It was a wrench to the ladies to leave Bertram House, despite the fact that it had been the scene of so much distress and want. "I shall certainly break my heart when I leave these old walls and trees," wrote Miss Mitford, but the blow was softened by the thought that she would still be able to wander about the fields and lanes which were so familiar and so dear to her, and, as was her wont on such occasions, gave vent to her feelings in a little sonnet :—

"Adieu, beloved and lovely home! Adieu,
Thou pleasant mansion, and ye waters bright,

Ye lawns, ye aged elms, ye shrubberies light
(My own cotemporary trees, that grew
Even with my growth); ye flowers of orient hue,
A long farewell to all! Ere fair to sight
In summer-shine ye bloom with beauty dight,
Your halls we leave for scenes untried and new.
Oh, shades endeared by memory's magic power,
With strange reluctance from your paths I roam!
But home lives not in lawn, or tree, or flower,
Nor dwells tenacious in one only dome.
Where smiling friends adorn the social hour,
Where they, the dearest are, there will be home."

Bertram House is a thing of the past, for there is little left of the building which the Mitfords knew. Another mansion occupies the site, and only the trees and shrubberies remain as evidence of Dr. Mitford's folly; while the name, which marked the Doctor's proud descent, has been erased in favour of the older title, Grazeley Court.

CHAPTER XIV

THE COTTAGE AT THREE MILE CROSS

IT was during March of the year 1820 that the removal to the cottage at Three Mile Cross took place. Although it was attended with the inevitable bustle and discomposure, it could not have been, according to all accounts, a job of very great difficulty, for most of the furniture and pictures had been sold—sold at odd times to meet pressing needs—and there was, therefore, little to convey but the three members of the family, such books as were left to them, together with Mossy—the dear old nurse who had shared their misfortunes right through from the Alresford days—and Lucy the maid.

We can almost picture the scene with the heavy farm-wagon, broad-wheeled and lumbering, crunching its ponderous way along the carriage-drive and out through the gates, with some of the dogs prancing and bounding, now before and now behind, barking at the unusual sight. Having cleared the gates there would be a turn to the left, along a short stretch of narrow lane emerging into the road from the village, where a sharp turn again to the left would take them on beneath

"Our Village" in 1913.

The Village of Three Mile Cross—A general view looking towards Reading.

over-arching elms—leafless and gaunt—over a tiny bridge spanning a tributary of the Loddon, past an occasional cottage where twitching parlour-blinds would betray the stealthy interest of the inmates in the passing of the folk from the big house; on until the road branched, where the right-hand fork would be taken, and so, by a gentle curve, the wagon would emerge by the side of the *George and Dragon* into the Basingstoke Road. And now, with a crack of the whip —for the last few steps must be performed in good style—the wagon would sweep once more to the left, where the finger-post, by the pond opposite, pointed to Reading, and in a moment or two draw up in the fore-court of the *Swan*, there to unload into the cottage next door.

Mossy and Lucy would be waiting to receive the goods, and the cobbler opposite would watch the proceedings with more than usual interest, for to him, that night, the village gossips would surely repair for news, he being so favourably placed for the garnering of it.

While the wagon is being unloaded we will transfer ourselves again to Bertram House.

The dogs are scampering and scurrying in the undergrowth of the now neglected shrubbery, chasing leaves which the March winds scatter crisply. The house is gaunt and cheerless as houses always are on such occasions. Fitful gleams of watery sunshine streak through the trees across to the steps down which two sad

women take their slow way. The dogs bound towards them and are greeted and stroked, the while they curve their sleek and graceful bodies in an ecstasy of delight.

Along the carriage-drive they walk, with its surface all over-grown with weeds and marked with the heavy wheels of the wagon, the tracks of which, deeply cut in the yielding road, they now follow. Once through the gates they turn for a backward glance of " My own cotemporary trees " and then a " long farewell to all." At the end of the lane they cast one sad look back —there is pain in the eyes of both—then turning they follow the wheel-marks until the cottage is reached, the door flies open—for Mossy has been watching for them—and all that the cobbler sees of their arrival will force him to draw on his imagination if his inquisitive neighbours are not to be disappointed.

" Your delightful letter, my dear Sir William," wrote Miss Mitford shortly afterwards, " arrived at the very moment when kindness was most needed and most welcome—just as we were leaving our dear old home to come to this new one. Without being in general very violently addicted to sentimentality, I was, as you may imagine, a little grieved to leave the spot where I had passed so many happy years. The trees, and fields, and sunny hedgerows, however little distinguished by picturesque beauty, were to me as old friends.

Women have more of this natural feeling than the stronger sex; they are creatures of home and habit, and ill brook transplanting. We, however, are not quite transplanted yet—rather, as the gardeners say, 'laid by the heels.' We have only moved to a little village street, situate on the turnpike road, between Basingstoke and the illustrious and quarrelsome borough [Reading]. Our residence is a cottage—no, not a cottage—it does not deserve the name—a messuage or tenement, such as a little farmer who had made twelve or fourteen hundred pounds might retire to when he left off business to live on his means. It consists of a series of closets, the largest of which may be about eight feet square, which they call parlours and kitchens and pantries; some of them minus a corner, which has been unnaturally filched for a chimney; others deficient in half a side, which has been truncated by the shelving roof. Behind is a garden about the size of a good drawing-room, with an arbour which is a complete sentry-box of privet. On one side a public-house, on the other a village shop, and right opposite a cobbler's stall.

"Notwithstanding all this, 'the cabin,' as Bobadil says, 'is convenient.' It is within reach of my dear old walks; the banks where I find my violets; the meadows full of cowslips; and the woods where the wood-sorrel blows. We are all beginning to get settled and comfortable, and

resuming our usual habits. Papa has already had the satisfaction of setting the neighbourhood to rights by committing a disorderly person, who was the pest of the Cross, to Bridewell. Mamma has furbished up an old dairy, and made it into a not incommodious store room. I have lost my only key, and stuffed the garden with flowers. It is an excellent lesson of condensation—one which we all wanted. Great as our merits might be in some points, we none of us excelled in compression. Mamma's tidiness was almost as diffuse as her daughter's litter. I expect we shall be much benefited by this squeeze; though at present it sits upon us as uneasily as tight stays, and is just as awkward looking. Indeed, my great objection to a small room always was its extreme unbecomingness to one of my enormity. I really seem to fill it—like a blackbird in a goldfinch's cage. The parlour looks all me."

Any doubts which the cobbler opposite may have entertained as to the status of the new arrivals—if, indeed, particulars had not already filtered through from Grazeley—must have been dispersed by the Doctor's action in at once removing the terror of the Cross. More than this, he had actually suspended the village constable—who was also the blacksmith—for appearing before him with a blood-stained head—an unwarrantable offence against the person of the Chairman of the Reading bench. Three Mile Cross was to be purged; henceforth, it must behave

itself, for a real live magistrate had come to live in the midst and, until the villagers found that the Doctor's bark was worse than his bite they might shake with apprehension—and "they" included the cobbler who stuck closer to his last and was not to be tempted to anything more than a knowing wink when the magistrate and his family came under discussion.

"Borrow a little of the only gift in which I can vie with you—the elastic spirit of Hope"—wrote Miss Mitford to Mrs. Hofland at this time, and in that sentence we catch a glimpse of this wonderful woman who point blank refused to acknowledge a shadow so long as but one streak of light were vouchsafed to her.

"This place is a mere *pied à terre*," she wrote, "till we can suit ourselves better," and her one dread was that her father would elect to live in Reading, to which town she had now taken a sudden and violent dislike. "Not that I have any quarrel with the town, which, as Gray said of Cambridge, 'would be well enough if it were not for the people'; but those people—their gossiping—their mistiness! Oh! you can imagine nothing so bad. They are as rusty as old iron, and as jagged as flints." By which we may quite properly infer that the affairs and dwindled fortunes of the Mitfords were being openly discussed.

As a matter of fact, they must at this time have been almost penniless, with nothing between

them and actual want but what they could obtain by the exertions of the daughter with her pen.

Whatever the original intention of the Doctor may have been as to the tenure of the cottage, it has to be recorded that it lasted for thirty years, witnessing the best and most successful of Miss Mitford's literary efforts and her short-lived triumph as a dramatist; marking the gradual decay and death of Mrs. Mitford, and the increasing selfishness of the Doctor, the results of which, when he died, were his daughter's only inheritance.

But, lest we should be accused of painting too gloomy a picture, let us also joyfully record that it was in this humble cottage and among the flowers of its garden that there gathered, from time to time, those truest friends who came from far and near to pay homage to the brave little woman who found comfort in the simple things of life, and was happy only when she was permitted to share her happiness with others.

Despite the pigs which came through the hedge from the *Swan* next door and " made sad havoc among my pinks and sweet-peas " ; despite, also, the pump which went dry " from force of habit," soon after they were installed, Miss Mitford was not long before she had " taken root," as she called it, and begun again her work and her correspondence.

Haydon, the artist, sent her a picture—his study for the head of St. Peter—a delicate com-

pliment and, seeing that their walls were so bare, a seasonable gift. "I am almost ashamed to take a thing of so much consequence" wrote the pleased recipient; "but you are a very proud man and are determined to pay me in this magnificent manner for pleasing myself with the fancy of being in a slight degree useful to you. Well, I am quite content to be the obliged person."

Anxious to keep down all needless expenditure we now read of the "discontinuance of my beloved *Morning Chronicle*" and of inability to accept invitations away because of "mamma's old complaint in her head" and "papa's sore throat, which he manages in the worst possible manner, alternately overdoing it and letting it quite alone; blistering it by gargling brandy one day, and going out in the rain and wind all the next; so that, to talk of going out, even to you, seems out of the question. They really can't do without me." On the other hand, and remembering the mistiness, the rustiness and flinty nature of the Reading folk, there was the pathetic plea to Sir William Elford that he should turn aside on his journeys to or from town, to pay the cottage and its inhabitants a visit. "We shall have both house-room and heart-room for you, and I depend on seeing you. Do pray come —you must come and help laugh at our strange shifts and the curious pieces of finery which our landlord has left for the adornment of his mansion. Did you ever see a corner cupboard? Pray

come and see us or you will break my heart—and let me know when you are coming."

Three months later she wrote :—" I have grown exceedingly fond of this little place. I love it of all things—have taken root completely—could be content to live and die here. . . . My method of doing nothing seldom varies. *Imprimis*, I take long walks and get wet through. *Item*, I nurse my flowers—sometimes pull up a few, taking them for weeds, and *vice versâ* leave the weeds, taking them for flowers. *Item*, I do a short job of needlework. *Item*, I write long letters. *Item*, I read all sorts of books, long and short, new and old. Have you a mind for a list of the most recent ? Buckhardt's *Travels in Nubia*, Bowdich's *Mission to Ashantee*, Dubois' *Account of India*, Morier's *Second Journey in Persia*. All these are quartos of various degrees of heaviness. There is another of the same class, La Touche's [1] *Life of Sir Philip Sidney* (you set me to reading that by your anecdote of Queen Elizabeth's hair). Southey's *Life of Wesley*—very good. Hogg's *Winter Evening Tales*—very good indeed (I have a great affection for the Ettrick Shepherd, have not you ?). *Diary of an Invalid*—the best account of Italy which I have met with since Forsythe—much in his manner—I think you would like it. Odeleben's *Campaign in Saxony* —interesting, inasmuch as it concerns Napoleon,

[1] Probably Miss Mitford meant T. Zouch's *Memoirs of Sir Philip Sidney*, published in 1809.

otherwise so-so. *The Sketch Book*, by Geoffrey Crayon—quite a curiosity—an American book which is worth reading. Mr. Milman's *Fall of Jerusalem*—a fine poem, though not exactly so fine as the *Quarterly* makes out. I thought it much finer when I first read it than I do now, for it set me to reading *Josephus*, which I had never had the grace to open before; and the historian is, in the striking passages, much grander than the poet, particularly in the account of the portents and prophecies before the Fall. These books, together with a few Italian things —especially the *Lettere di Ortes*—will pretty well account for my time since I wrote last, and convince you of the perfect solitude, which gives me time to indulge so much in the delightful idleness of reading."

The anecdote of Queen Elizabeth's hair to which Miss Mitford alludes in the preceding letter, was one of which Sir William wrote in the previous April. It was to the effect that two ladies of his acquaintance had just paid a visit to Lord Pembroke's family at Wilton, and whilst there one of them desired to see the *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadie* when, in perusing it, she discovered, between two of the leaves, a long lock of yellow hair, folded in an envelope in which was written, in Sir Philip Sidney's handwriting, a declaration that the lock was "The faire Queen Elizabeth's hair," given him by her Majesty. In recounting this anecdote to Mrs. Hofland, Miss

Mitford remarked that "the miraculous part of the story is, that at Wilton, amongst her own descendants, the *Arcadia* should be so completely a dead letter. I suppose it was snugly ensconced between some of Sir Philip's Sapphics or Dactylics, which are, to be sure, most unreadable things."

But, apart from this "idleness of reading," Miss Mitford was busily gathering material for her articles in the *Lady's Magazine*, roaming the countryside for colour. "I have already been cowslipping" she wrote. "Are you fond of field flowers? They are my passion—even more, I think, than greyhounds or books. This country is eminently flowery. Besides all the variously-tinted primroses and violets in singular profusion, we have all sorts of orchises and arums; the delicate wood anemone; the still more delicate wood-sorrel, with its lovely purple veins meandering over the white drooping flower; the field-tulip, with its rich chequer-work of lilac and crimson, and the sun shining through the leaves as through old painted glass; the ghostly field star of Bethlehem—that rare and ghost-like flower; wild lilies of the valley; and the other day I found a field completely surrounded by wild periwinkles. They ran along the hedge for nearly a quarter of a mile; to say nothing of the sculptural beauty of the white water-lily and the golden clusters of the golden ranunculus. Yes, this is really a country of flowers, and so beautiful just now that there is no making up one's mind to leave it."

CHAPTER XV

A BUSY WOMAN

THIS first year in the cottage at Three Mile Cross was spent in a variety of ways by Miss Mitford. In addition to her reading, she was devoting herself to getting the garden into trim and by taking extended walks in the neighbourhood, particularly in exploring that beautiful " Woodcock Lane "—happily still preserved and, possibly, more beautiful than in Miss Mitford's day—so called, " not after the migratory bird so dear to sportsman and to epicure, but from the name of a family, who, three centuries ago, owned the old manor-house, a part of which still adjoins it." A delightful picture of this lane, full of the happiest and tenderest memories, is to be found in Miss Mitford's *Recollections of a Literary Life*. It is too long for quotation here, but for its truth to Nature we can testify, for we have ourselves wandered down its shady length, book in hand, marking and noting the passages as this and that point of view was described, and looking away over the fields as she must have looked—somewhat wistfully, we may believe—to where the smoke from the chimneys at Grazeley Court

curled upwards from the trees which so effectually hide the building itself from view. While on these walks, accompanied by Fanchon, the greyhound and Flush, the spaniel, she would take her unspillable ink-bottle and writing materials and, resting awhile beneath the great trees, write of Nature as she saw it, spread there before her. Here, undoubtedly, she wrote many of those pictures of rural life and scenery which, at present, form the most lasting memorial of her life and work.

The monotony—if there could be monotony in such labour—was broken by a short, three-day's holiday at Richmond and London which gave her a fund of incident wherewith to amuse her friend Sir William in lengthy letters. Of the sights she missed, two were the pictures of Queen Caroline and Mrs. Opie, "that excellent and ridiculous person, who is now placed in Bond Street (where she can't even hear herself talk) with a blue hat and feathers on her head, a low gown without a tucker, and ringlets hanging down each shoulder. The first I don't care if I never see at all; for be it known to you, my dear friend, that I am no Queen's woman, whatever my party may be. I have no toleration for an indecorous woman, and am exceedingly scandalized at the quantity of nonsense which has been talked in her defence. It is no small part of her guilt, or her folly, that her arrival has turned conversation into a channel of scandal and detraction on either side, which, if it continue, threatens

Woodcock Lane, Three Mile Cross.

to injure the taste, the purity, the moral character of the nation. Don't you agree with me ?

" I heard very little literary news. Everybody is talking of ' Marcian Colonna,' Barry Cornwall's new poem. Now ' Barry Cornwall ' is an *alias*. The poet's real name is Procter, a young attorney, who feared it might hurt his practice if he were known to follow this ' idle trade.' It has, however, become very generally known, and poor Mr. Procter is terribly embarrassed with his false name. He neither knows how to keep it on or throw it up. By whatever appellation he chooses to be called, he is a great poet. Poor John Keats is dying of the *Quarterly Review*. This is a sad, silly thing ; but it is true. A young, delicate, imaginative boy—that withering article fell upon him like an east wind. Mr. Gifford's behaviour is very bad. He sent word that if he wrote again his poem should be properly reviewed, which was admitting the falsity of his first critique, and yet says that he has been Keats' best friend, because somebody sent him twenty-five pounds to console him for the injustice of the *Quarterly*."

Interspersed with these letters to Sir William were many kindly, womanly epistles to Mrs. Hofland and particularly to the painter, Haydon, who, poor man, was always having a quarrel with somebody ; sometimes with the Academy and sometimes with his patrons. True to her sex, Miss Mitford was ever on the side of what

she considered were the weak and down-trodden, and in this class she placed her friend Haydon. "Never apologize to me for talking of yourself," she wrote to him; "it is a compliment of the highest kind. It tells me that you confide in my sympathy."

In November public festivities to celebrate Queen Caroline's acquittal were held, and Three Mile Cross, not to be outdone in demonstrative sympathy, decided to illuminate. "Think of that! an illumination at Three Mile Cross! We were forced to illuminate. Forced to put up two dozen of candles upon pain of pelting and rioting and all manner of bad things. So we did. We were very shabby though, compared with our neighbours. One, a retired publican, just below, had a fine transparency, composed of a pocket handkerchief with the Queen's head upon it—a very fine head in a hat and feathers cocked very knowingly on one side. I did not go to Reading; the *squibbery* there was too much to encounter; and they had only one good hit throughout the whole of that illustrious town. A poor man had a whole-length transparency of the Duke of Wellington saved from the Peace illumination, and, not knowing what to get now, he, as a matter of economy, hung up the noble Duke again topsy-turvy, heel upwards—a mixture of drollery and savingness which took my fancy much. And, certainly, bad as she is, the Queen has contrived to trip the heels of the Ministers."

As the year progressed, Miss Mitford made another attempt at dramatic work, devoting her energies to a tragedy on the subject of *Fiesco*, the Genoese nobleman who conspired against Doria. The idea of a play written on this theme had originated during her recent short visit to London, where she had witnessed an "indifferent tragedy, of which the indifferent success brought the author three or four hundred pounds." Schiller had, it will be remembered, already used the subject, but this did not deter our author from trying her 'prentice hand on it. When it was finished—she had worked very assiduously—it was sent off to her friend Talfourd for his advice and criticism, and in the hope that should he approve it, he would be able to negotiate for its production at one of the theatres. To Haydon she wrote confiding her fears and hopes. "It is terribly feeble and womanish, of course—wants breadth—wants passion—and has nothing to redeem its faults but a little poetry and some merit, they say, in the dialogue. My anxiety is not of vanity. It is not fame or praise that I want, but the power of assisting my dearest and kindest father." Talfourd, most anxious to be of service to his little friend—most anxious because he knew much of the sad tragedy of the last few years—managed to secure the interest of Macready, the actor, who promised to consider the manuscript.

Macready's letter to Talfourd, transcribed for

the edification of Sir William Elford, is important inasmuch as it affords some idea of that actor's readiness, at all times, to help any struggling author who might appeal to him. He never forgot his own early struggles and his fellow-feeling towards others in desperate plight made him wondrous kind. "Mr. Macready wrote the other day to my friend and his friend [Talfourd] who gave him my play, and this mutual friend copied his letter for my edification. It was, in the first place, the prettiest letter I ever read in my life—thoroughly careless, simple, unpresuming—showing great diffidence of his own judgment, the readiest good-nature, the kindest and most candid desire to be pleased—quite the letter of a scholar and a gentleman, and not the least like that of an actor. As far as regarded my tragedy, it contained much good criticism. Mr. Macready thinks—and he is right—that there is too little of striking incident, and too little fluctuation. Indeed, I have made my *Fiesco* as virtuous and as fortunate as *Sir Charles Grandison*, and he goes about *prôné* by everybody and setting everybody to rights much in the same style with that worthy gentleman, only that he has one wife instead of two mistresses. Nevertheless, the dialogue, which is my strong part, has somehow 'put salt upon Mr. Macready's tail,' so that he is in a very unhappy state of doubt about it, and cannot make up his mind one way or the other. The only thing upon

which he was decided was that the handwriting was illegible, and that it must be copied for presentment to the managers. This has been done accordingly, and Mr. Macready and they will now do exactly what they like."

The consideration of the manuscript was prolonged, and it was not until the midsummer of the following year (1821), that it was finally returned on its author's hands as unsuitable. Meanwhile, her friends in London had been busy in her interest and she was now working "as hard as a lawyer's clerk" in writing for the magazines—poetry, criticism, and dramatic sketches. Confessing to a "natural loathing of pen and ink which that sort of drudgery cannot fail to inspire," she mentions that she now has no leisure, "scarcely a moment to spare, even for the violets and primroses." The necessity for polish was impressed upon her. "You would laugh if you saw me puzzling over my prose. You have no notion how much difficulty I find in writing anything at all readable. One cause of this is, my having been so egregious a letter-writer. I have accustomed myself to a certain careless sauciness, a fluent incorrectness, which passed very well with indulgent friends, such as yourself, my dear Sir William, but will not do at all for that tremendous correspondent, the Public. So I ponder over every phrase, disjoint every sentence, and finally produce such lumps of awkwardness, that I really expect, instead of paying me for them,

Mr. Colburn and Mr. Baldwin will send me back the trash. But I will improve. . . . I am now occupied in dramatic sketches for *Baldwin's Magazine*—slight stories of about one act, developed in fanciful dialogue of loose blank verse. If Mr. Baldwin will accept a series of such articles they will be not merely extremely advantageous to me in a pecuniary point of view (for the pay is well up—they give fifteen guineas a sheet), but excellent exercises for my tragedies. At the same time I confess to you that nothing seems to me so tiresome and unsatisfactory as writing poetry. Ah! how much better I like working flounces! There, when one had done a pattern, one was sure that one had got on, and had the comfort of admiring one's work and exulting in one's industry all the time that one was, in fact, indulging in the most comfortable indolence. Well! courage, Missy Mitford! (as *Blackwood's Magazine* has the impudence to call me!) *Courage, mon amie!*"

Nothing daunted by the failure of *Fiesco*, and notwithstanding the pressure of work for the magazines, Miss Mitford was devoting all the time she could spare to a fresh tragedy, the subject this time being the Venetian Doge Foscari. The project was submitted to Talfourd's judgment and approved, and by October the finished play was in his hands for presentation to the managers. As ill luck would have it, Byron had been working quietly at a play on the identical subject, and his

was announced on the very day that Miss Mitford's *Foscari* was to be handed to a manager for his perusal. "I am so distressed at the idea of a competition," she wrote; "not merely with his lordship's talents, but with his great name; and the strange awe in which he holds people; and the terrible scoffs and sneers in which he indulges himself; that I have written to Mr. Talfourd requesting him to consult another friend on the propriety of entirely suppressing my play —and I heartily wish he may. If it be sent back to me unoffered, I shall immediately begin another play on some German story."

Talfourd decided that the play should take its chance, and in December had the satisfaction of hearing that Macready, who had read it, had passed it on to the manager with a strong recommendation that it be accepted. In the construction of the play and the development of the characters, Miss Mitford had been guided by the assumption that, in the event of its being accepted the actors Kemble, Young and Macready would take the leading parts. Unfortunately, however, a little dissension between these actors just at the critical moment, led to the secession of Charles Kemble and to hesitancy in the case of Young, with the result that Macready was the only one left to fulfil the author's original purpose. The tragedy represented much hard work, for Macready was, very properly, an extremely critical man and before he would agree to submit the

play, had asked its author to revise one of the acts at least three times—which she did, without demur.

Late in December of that same year she received an intimation that the play was rejected. It was a heavy blow, for, although she had half expected it from the outset, the prolonged negotiations had led her to hope that her fears would not be realized; and, she was counting much on the pecuniary advantages of its production. Talfourd softened the blow in his own kindly way. He wrote:—"I have with great difficulty screwed myself up to the point of informing you that all our hopes are, for the present, cruelly blighted. *Foscari* has been returned by Mr. Harris to Mr. Macready, with a note, of which the following is an exact copy:—

"My dear Sir,—I return you the tragedy of *Foscari*, and it is with regret that I am obliged to express an opinion that it would not succeed in representation. The style is admirably pure and chaste, and some of the scenes would be highly effective; yet as a whole it would be found wanting in that scale by which the public weigh our performances of the first class. Should the ingenious author at any time bestow the labour of revision and alteration on the tragedy, I should be most happy to have a reperusal of it—Ever yours, H. Harris.' I am quite sickened at this result of all your labours and anxieties. The only consolation I can offer is, that Mr. Macready

assures me he never knew a refusal which came so near an acceptance; for Harris has spoken to him in even higher terms of eulogy than he has written; and I have seen another letter of Harris's, about other plays, in which he puts *Foscari* far above all others that he has rejected, and in point of style and writing, above one of Shiel's [Richard Lalor Sheil] that is to be acted. You see, he holds open a prospect of its being reconsidered, if altered. Whether you will adopt this suggestion is for your own decision; but certainly this play has quite prepared the way for most respectful attention to any piece you may send in hereafter."

Before proceeding to alter her play, Miss Mitford took the precaution to secure and read Byron's *Two Foscari*, and was delighted to find that he had dealt with the subject at a point subsequent to her own, so that the plays were not likely to clash. Furthermore, she found little in Byron's work to commend, and thought it could scarcely meet with any success from representation. "Altogether, it seems to me that Lord Byron must be by this time pretty well convinced that the drama is not his forte. He has no spirit of dialogue—no beauty in his groupings—none of that fine mixture of the probable with the unexpected which constitutes stage effect in the best sense of the word. And a long series of laboured speeches and set antitheses will very ill compensate for the want of that excellence

which we find in Sophocles and in Shakespeare, and which some will call Nature, and I shall call Art." And as proof that her judgment was not warped by petty jealousy—jealousy of Byron, on her part, would indeed have been stupid—it is interesting to recall the criticism which Macready made in his "Diaries" some years after, when seriously reading Byron's *Foscari* with a view to its adoption. Under date April 24, 1834, he wrote :—"Looked into the *Foscari* of Byron. I am of opinion that it is not dramatic—the slow, almost imperceptible progress of the action . . . will prevent, I think, its success in representation." In June, 1835, he wrote :—"Read over Lord Byron's *Foscari*, which does not seem to me to contain the power, or rather the variety and intensity of passion which many of his other plays do."

Having satisfied herself that she had nothing to fear from Byron's work she once more applied herself to her own in the endeavour to supply it with those elements in which she and her kindly critics knew it to be deficient—but it was a labour. "I am so thoroughly out of heart about the *Foscari* that I cannot bear even to think or speak on the subject. Nevertheless, the drama is my talent—my only talent—and I mean to go on and improve. I *will* improve—that is my fixed determination. To be of some little use to those who are dearest to me was the only motive of my attempt, and I shall persevere."

CHAPTER XVI

"GOD GRANT ME TO DESERVE SUCCESS"

STILL working at high pressure with her magazine articles, Miss Mitford was able to give the promised attention to *Foscari*, and in June, 1822, dispatched it with its new fifth act—it was the seventh revision of this particular act—to London and, this time, to Charles Kemble for she now held the opinion that the play was not exactly suited to Macready's style. In the meantime, it was her intention to write something more ambitious "a higher tragedy, with some fine and splendid character, the real hero for Macready, and some gallant-spirited youth, who may seem the hero, for Mr. Kemble."

Having sent off the manuscript she tried hard to forget it and to possess her soul in patience, but now and again in her letters—very few, now that she was so busy—there are indications of her anxiety. "If my *Foscari* were to succeed I should be tempted to have a pony-chaise myself"—this because a friend had called and given her the pleasure of a short ride—"I do so love a drive in a pony-chaise! You know, every-

thing that I want or wish I always say 'if *Foscari* succeeds.' I said so the other day about a new straw bonnet, and then about a white geranium, and then about a pink sash, and then about a straw work-basket, and then about a pocket-book, all in the course of one street."

In August and September she paid flying visits to town to see Kemble about the play and found him so charming that she confessed—hoping no one would tell Mrs. Kemble!—she was the least in the world in love with him and that he ranked second to Napoleon in her imagination. He made her a promise that, subject to the approval of Macready—then on an Italian tour—he would produce the play the first of the season. "Nothing I believe, is certain in a theatre till the curtain is fairly drawn up and let down again; but, as far as I can see, I have, from the warm zeal and admirable character of the new manager and his very clever and kind-hearted lady, every reason to expect a successful *début*. Wish for me and *Foscari*. You have all my kindest and gratefulest thoughts, though a tremendous pressure of occupation will not allow me to express them so often as I used to do."

Unfortunately Kemble was unable to fulfil his promise, Macready having arranged first for the production of another play, "but," said she, "Charles Kemble, my dear Charles Kemble says—almost swears—it shall be acted this

season, and with new dresses and new scenery. There has been a terrible commotion in consequence of C. Kemble's reluctance to delay. If it were not for my absolute faith in *him* I should despair."

Kemble kept his promise, as well as he was able, by producing the play during the year 1826, but only at the expense of a quarrel with Macready—a quarrel fanned by Mrs. Kemble who, although Miss Mitford had written of her as "the clever, kind-hearted lady" was subsequently described in a letter to Talfourd, as making statements "so artificial, so made up, so untrue, *so circular*—if she had said a great deal less without the fine words and the 'Dear Madams' I should have believed her much more."

At this juncture, and before there was any idea of the possibility of friction between himself and Kemble, Macready had suggested to Miss Mitford that she should write him a historical play and went so far as to outline the plot. To have such a suggestion from the great tragedian was in itself sufficient to send her into an ecstacy —here was proof positive of his belief in her— and so, submitting the project for Talfourd's approval, and being urged by him to proceed, she set to work at fever heat, towards the close of 1822, on the play of *Julian*. It was strenuous work and all the while the author was torn with the fear that she would not be able to produce anything worthy of Macready. Dr. Valpy was

being continually referred to for his judgment on the various characters—whether they were too weak or too strong—too prudish or too improper—and Talfourd was besought to " speak the truth, fearlessly, and say whether I shall give it up." At last it was finished and was sent to Macready and Talfourd for their judgment and criticism.

" My execution falls very short of your design," she wrote; " but indeed it is not for want of pains—I think one reason why it is so ill done, is the strong anxiety I had to do well—to justify your and Mr. Macready's kind encouragement —the stimulus was too great." Both Macready and Talfourd made corrections and suggestions, which the author duly acted upon and thereby won unstinted praise from her two friendly critics. " I hope you and he are as right in your praise, as in your censure—but I confess that I am not yet recovered from my astonishment at the extent of your approbation—I am afraid you overrate it—sadly afraid. And yet it is very delightful to be so overrated. It would be a shame if I did not improve with the unspeakable advantage of your advice and your kindness and all the pains you have taken with me.

On *Julian*, which she characterized as worth a thousand of *Foscari*, she was ready to stake all her dramatic hopes and when, at length, in February, 1823, Macready read the play in the green-room and promised its production in ten

days or a fortnight, her delight was unbounded. It was produced in the second week of March, with Macready as the principal character, and met with instant success. The author went to town on a visit to her friend, Mrs. Hofland, in Newman Street, that she might the better enjoy the exquisite pain and pleasure of seeing her play presented for the first time. Although she had sent and received many messages to and from Macready, through their mutual friend Talfourd, she had not met him until this occasion and it is no figure of speech to say that they were each considerably struck with the other. Miss Mitford's verdict on the interview, conveyed in a letter to Sir William Elford, was "He is just such another soul of fire as Haydon —highly educated, and a man of great literary acquirements—consorting entirely with poets and young men of talent. Indeed it is to his knowledge of my friend Mr. Talfourd that I owe the first introduction of my plays to his notice."

The result to Miss Mitford in cash on the production of *Julian* was £200, not a vast sum in the light of present-day successes, but still very fair considering that it only ran for eight days, having to be withdrawn in favour of another play. In any case the money was very acceptable to the inmates of the little cottage at Three Mile Cross. The endeavour to clear up outstanding debts weighed heavily on Miss Mitford and, short of a reserve for the barest necessities,

the whole of her income was being devoted to that end. A few things of value had been saved from the wreck of the Bertram House establishment, notably some choice engravings, and those were sent to Mrs. Hofland in London who had promised to warehouse them until such time as the owners, having acquired a larger house, might send for them. Any hope of this contingency, which Miss Mitford may have entertained, had been dispersed by the year 1823, and so we find her writing in June of that year begging Mrs. Hofland to try and dispose of some of the pictures to Messrs. Hurst and Robinson and to arrange for the sale of the rest either at Sotheby's or Robins's.

It was indeed a most anxious year, notwithstanding the triumph of *Julian* and the fact that its author was one of the most talked-of women of the day.

During her stay in London to witness the production of *Julian* and at one of her interviews with Macready the two had discussed another play project, various subjects for treatment being suggested—among them that of *Procida* (subsequently abandoned because Mrs. Hemans was found to be at work on it), and *Rienzi* which Miss Mitford very much favoured but Macready did not as he thought her outline of the plot would entail on her a greater strain than she could stand. For a time the matter was left in abeyance, as she had much, just

Mary Russell Mitford.

(From a painting by Miss Drummond, 1823.)

then, wherewith to occupy her mind. Kemble was threatening her with a law-suit if, as she much desired, she withdrew *Foscari*—she rather feared that its production after *Julian* would do her no good—and she was so tossed about, as she said, between him and Macready, "affronting both parties and suspected by both, because I will not come to a deadly rupture with either," that she got quite ill with worry. To add to her miseries the editor of the *Lady's Magazine* absconded, owing her £40. "Oh! who would be an authoress!" she wofully wrote to her old friend Sir William. "The only comfort is that the magazine can't go on without me [its circulation had gone up from two hundred and fifty copies to two thousand since she had written for it]; and that the very fuss they make in quarrelling over me at the theatre proves my importance there; so that, if I survive these vexations, I may in time make something of my poor, poor brains. But I would rather serve in a shop—rather scour floors—rather nurse children, than undergo these tremendous and interminable disputes and this unwomanly publicity. Pray forgive this sad no-letter. Alas! the free and happy hours, when I could read and think and prattle for you, are past away. Oh! will they ever return? I am now chained to a desk, eight, ten, twelve hours a day, at mere drudgery. All my thoughts of writing are for hard money. All my corre-

spondence is on hard business. Oh! pity me, pity me! My very mind is sinking under the fatigue and anxiety. God bless you, my dear friend! Forgive this sad letter."

It was truly a sad letter, so unlike the usually bright, optimistic woman, that he would be dense indeed who failed to read in it other than evidence of a strain almost too great for this gentle woman to bear. And what of Dr. Mitford at this time? What was he doing in the matter of sharing the burden which he alone, through negligence and wicked self-indulgence, had thrust upon his daughter? Truly he was now less often in town and the famous kennel was in process of being dispersed—there was neither room nor food for greyhounds at Three Mile Cross—but short of his magisterial duties, which were, of course, unremunerated, his time was scarcely occupied. At last the fact of his daughter's worn-out condition seems to have been borne in upon him and in her next letter to Sir William, dated in May, 1823, she has the pleasure to record:

"My father has at last resolved—partly, I believe, instigated by the effect which the terrible feeling of responsibility and want of power has had on my health and spirits—to try if he can himself obtain any employment that may lighten the burthen. He is, as you know, active, healthy, and intelligent, and with a strong sense of duty and of right. I am sure that he would fulfil to

the utmost any charge that might be confided to him; and if it were one in which my mother or I could assist, you may be assured that he would have zealous and faithful coadjutors. For the management of estates or any country affairs he is particularly well qualified; or any work of superintendence which requires integrity and attention. If you should hear of any such, would you mention him, or at least let me know? The addition of two, or even one hundred a year to our little income, joined to what I am, in a manner, sure of gaining by mere industry, would take a load from my heart of which I can scarcely give you an idea. It would be everything to me; for it would give me what, for many months, I have not had—the full command of my own powers. Even *Julian* was written under a pressure of anxiety which left me not a moment's rest. I am, however, at present, quite recovered from the physical effects of this tormenting affair, and have regained my flesh and colour, and almost my power of writing prose articles; and if I could but recover my old hopefulness and elasticity, should be again such as I used to be in happier days. Could I but see my dear father settled in any employment, I know I should. Believe me ever, with the truest affection,

"Very gratefully yours, M. R. M."

A pathetic and tragic letter! At last the

scales had dropped from her eyes. And yet, though the letter is, as it stands, an implicit condemnation of her father's laziness, it is overburdened with affectionate praise of him and a catalogue of virtues in all of which his life had proved him notably and sadly deficient. Dr. Mitford, regenerated, as presented by his daughter, cuts a sorry figure; for him the art of "turning over a new leaf" was lost, if indeed he ever practised it. Proof of this was forthcoming in the next letter addressed to the same correspondent and written three months later! "I hasten my dear and kind friend, to reply to your very welcome letter. I am quite well now, and if not as hopeful as I used to be, yet less anxious, and far less depressed than I ever expected to feel again. This is merely the influence of the scenery, the flowers, the cool yet pleasant season, and the absence of all literary society; for our prospects are not otherwise changed. *My dear father, relying with a blessed sanguineness on my poor endeavours, has not, I believe, even inquired for a situation*; and I do not press the matter, though I anxiously wish it, being willing to give one more trial to the theatre. If I could but get the assurance of earning for my dear father and mother a humble competence I should be the happiest creature in the world. But for these dear ties, I should never write another line, but go out in some situation as other destitute women do. It seems

to me, however, my duty to try a little longer; the more especially as I am sure separation would be felt by all of us to be the greatest of all evils.

"My present occupation is a great secret; I will tell it to you *in strict confidence.* It is the boldest attempt ever made by a woman, which I have undertaken at the vehement desire of Mr. Macready, who confesses that he has proposed the subject to every dramatic poet of his acquaintance—that it has been the wish of his life—and that he never met with any one courageous enough to attempt it before. In short, I am engaged in a grand historical tragedy on the greatest subject in English story—Charles and Cromwell. Should you ever have suspected your poor little friend of so adventurous a spirit? Mr. Macready does not mean the author to be known, and I do not think it will be found out, which is the reason of my so earnestly requesting your silence on the subject. Macready thinks that my sex was, in great part, the occasion of the intolerable malignity with which *Julian* was attacked." [A scathing article on *Julian* appeared in one of the magazines and was considered, by both Macready and Miss Mitford, to have been inspired, if not written, by Kemble.]

Continuing her letter Miss Mitford detailed how she proposed to treat the subject and concluded with another appeal for interest in securing her father employment:—"Pray, my dear friend,

if you should hear of any situation that would suit my dear father, do not fail to let me know, for that would be the real comfort, to be rid of the theatre and all its troubles. Anything in the medical line, provided the income, however small, were certain, he would be well qualified to undertake. *I hope there is no want of duty in my wishing him to contribute his efforts with mine to our support.* God knows, if I could, if there were any certainty, how willingly, how joyfully, I would do all. . . . If I were better, more industrious, more patient, more consistent, I do think I should succeed; and I will try to be so. I promise you I will, and to make the best use of my poor talents. Pray forgive this egotism; it is a relief and a comfort to me to pour forth my feelings to so dear and so respected a friend; and they are not now so desolate, not quite so desolate, as they have been. God grant me to deserve success!"

Again how pathetic! And how tragic is this spectacle of a worn-out woman of thirty-six, pleading for help and comfort, and promising, like a little child, to be good and work hard; and that notwithstanding her twelve hours a day at the self-imposed task—which she now finds to be drudgery—or the terror with which she views this great opportunity now offered her by Macready and which she dare not refuse lest she be blamed for letting slip any chance of earning money. And all that a worthless

father may be shielded and the real cause of the trouble be obscured.

To add to her burdens—her mother was taken suddenly and seriously ill shortly after the above letter was written, necessitating the most careful and vigilant nursing. Her complaint—spasmodic asthma—was so bad that, as the daughter recorded, "I have feared, night after night, that she would die in my arms." Eventually she recovered, but meanwhile, of course, all literary work had to be abandoned, not only because of the constant attention which the patient's condition demanded but by reason of the "working of the perpetual fear on my mind which was really debilitating, almost paralyzing, in its effect."

CHAPTER XVII

OUR VILLAGE IS PUBLISHED

WITH her mother now convalescent, the year 1824 opened to find Miss Mitford more composed in mind. She was still turning over in her mind her friend Macready's great commission, but as he had bade her take plenty of time, she occupied herself with gathering together and polishing the *Lady's Magazine* articles on country life with a view to their publication in volume form. Mr. George B. Whittaker, of Ave Maria Lane—" papa's godson, by-the-by "—was the chosen publisher and we may be certain that there was much fussing and discussion between the parties concerned before the details were finally arranged. Mr. Whittaker was, according to his godfather's daughter, " a young and dashing friend of mine, this year sheriff of London, and is, I hear, so immersed in his official dignities as to have his head pretty much turned topsy-turvy, or rather, in French phraseology, to have lost that useful appendage ; so I should not wonder now, if it did not come out, till I am able to get to town and act for

myself in the business, and I have not yet courage to leave mamma."

Had Mr. Whittaker known what was in store for him he would probably have lost his head; but neither author nor publisher had the faintest notion that the modest volume, then projecting, was to be the forerunner of a series destined to take the world by storm and to be the one effort—apart from dramatic and sonneteering successes, which were to fade into obscurity—by which alone the name of Mary Russell Mitford was to be remembered.

Its modest title—*Our Village*—was the author's own choice, and it was to consist of essays and characters and stories, chiefly of country life, in the manner of the *Sketch Book*, but without sentimentality or pathos—two things abhorred by the author—and to be published with or without its author's name, as it might please the publisher. "At all events," wrote Miss Mitford to Sir William, "the author has no wish to be *incognita*; so I tell you as a *secret to be told*."

"When you see *Our Village*," she continued, "(which if my sheriff be not bestraught, I hope may happen soon), you will see that my notions of prose style are nicer than these galloping letters would give you to understand."

The excitement of preparing for the press revived her old interest in life and stirred her once again to indulge in that free and blithesome

correspondence which had been so unceremoniously dropped when her domestic troubles seemed so overpowering. Her introduction to Macready had been followed by an introduction to his sister whom, as usual, Miss Mitford found to be all that was charming. In her impulsive fashion she quickly divined the characters of both and wrote of her impressions to her confidant, Sir William. "They are very fascinating people, of the most polished and delightful manners, and with no fault but the jealousy and unreasonableness which seem to me the natural growth of the green-room. I can tell you just exactly what Mr. Macready would have said of me and *Julian*. He would have spoken of me as a meritorious and amiable person, of the play as a first-rate performance, and of the treatment as 'infamous!' 'scandalous!' 'unheard-of!'—would have heaped every phrase of polite abuse which the language contains on the Covent Garden manager; and then would have concluded as follows:—'But it is Miss Mitford's own fault—entirely her own fault. She is, with all her talent, the weakest and most feeble-minded woman that ever lived. If she had put matters into *my* hands—if she had withdrawn *The Foscari*—if she had threatened the managers with a lawsuit—if she had published her case—if she had suffered me to manage for her; she would have been the queen of the theatre. Now, you will see her the slave of Charles Kemble.

The old Wheelwright's Shop at "Our Village," in 1913.

She is the weakest woman that ever trode the earth.' This is exactly what he would have said; the way in which he talks of me to every one, and most of all to myself. 'Is Mr. Macready a great actor?' you ask. I think that I should answer, '*He might have been a very* GREAT *one.*' Whether he be now I doubt. A very clever actor he certainly is; but he has vitiated his taste by his love of strong effects, and been spoilt in town and country; and I don't know that I do call him a very great actor . . . I have a physical pleasure in the sound of Mr. Macready's voice, whether talking, or reading, or acting (except when he rants). It seems to me very exquisite music, with something instrumental and vibrating in the sound, like certain notes of the violoncello. He is grace itself; and he has a great deal of real sensibility, mixed with some trickery."

As far as it goes, and based on so slight an acquaintance, the portrait is not much short of the truth, as witness Macready's own diaries wherein, strong man that he was, he set down all his faults and failings. But he was a much-provoked man, the reason being that he never did, or could, descend to the low level of his tormentors. As for his being, or not being, a great actor, Miss Mitford must be forgiven her hasty judgment; posterity rightly disagrees with her.

Spring was just merging into summer and the

thoughts of jaded and satiated townfolk were turning to the consideration of green fields and smiling meadows when the first modest little volume of *Our Village* issued shyly forth from George Whittaker's office. "Cause it to be asked for at the circulating libraries," urged the designing author of all her friends.

The book caught on; its pages were redolent of the country; its colour was true and vivid; it told of simple delights and did for Berkshire what no author had ever previously done for any place. Charles Lamb, then in the full enjoyment of his fame as *Elia*, said that nothing so fresh and characteristic had appeared for a long time. Sir William Elford was delighted but ventured the suggestion that the sketches would have been better if written in the form of letters, but this the author denied by reminding him that the pieces were too long, and too connected, for *real* correspondence; "and as to anything make-believe, it has been my business to keep that out of sight as much as possible. Besides which, we are free and easy in these days, and talk to the public as a friend. Read *Elia*, or the *Sketch Book*, or Hazlitt's *Table-Talk*, or any popular book of the new school, and you will find that we have turned over the Johnsonian periods and the Blair-ian formality to keep company with the wigs and hoops, the stiff curtseys and low bows of our ancestors. 'Are the characters and descriptions

true ? ' you ask. Yes ! yes ! yes ! As true as is well possible. You, as a great landscape painter, know that in painting a favourite scene you do a little embellish, and can't help it ; you avail yourself of happy accidents of atmosphere, and if anything be ugly, you strike it out, or if anything be wanting, you put it in. But still the picture is a likeness ; and that this is a very faithful one, you will judge when I tell you that a worthy neighbour of ours, a post captain, who has been in every quarter of the globe, and is equally distinguished for the sharp look-out and *bonhomie* of his profession, accused me most seriously of carelessness in putting *The Rose* for *The Swan* as the sign of our next-door neighbour ; and was no less disconcerted at the *misprint* (as he called it) of B for R in the name of our next town. *A cela près*, he declares the picture to be exact. Nevertheless I do not expect to be poisoned. Why should I ? I have said no harm of my neighbours, have I ? The great danger would be that my dear friend Joel might be spoilt ; but I take care to keep the book out of our pretty Harriette's way ; and so I hope that that prime ornament of our village will escape the snare for his vanity which the seeing so exact a portrait of himself in a printed book might occasion. By the way, the names of the villagers are true—of the higher sketches they are feigned, of course."

The sales were beyond the wildest dreams

of the author and publisher, for it was well reviewed in all the literary papers and discussed in all the literary circles. "Where is *Our Village*?" was the question folk were asking each other, and when the secret leaked out, there was a constant stream of traffic from here, there and everywhere to the quiet village of Three Mile Cross, whose inhabitants were the last of all to discover that they had been "put into a book." What a theme for the cobbler over the way! How he must have neglected his work to watch the congratulating visitors who thronged the cottage opposite, all asking the beaming and delighted author "How she thought of it?" and "Why she did it?" And when, at length, a copy of the book itself found its way to the parlour of the *George and Dragon* and the cobbler saw himself as "the shoemaker opposite," we can almost fancy we catch the gratified light in his eye and hear his astonished—"Well! I'll be jiggered!"

And since no letter to any of her numerous correspondents ever contained so charming a description, here let us quote from *Our Village* its author's picture of her own dwelling:—"A cottage—no—a miniature house, with many additions, little odds and ends of places, pantries, and what-nots; all angles, and of a charming in-and-out-ness; a little bricked court before one half, and a little flower-yard before the other; the walls, old and weather-stained,

covered with hollyhocks, roses, honeysuckles, and a great apricot tree; the casements full of geraniums (ah! there is our superb white cat peeping out from among them); the closets (our landlord has the assurance to call them rooms) full of contrivances and corner-cupboards; and the little garden behind full of common flowers, tulips, pinks, larkspurs, peonies, stocks, and carnations, with an arbour of privet, not unlike a sentry-box, where one lives in a delicious green light, and looks out on the gayest of all gay flower-beds. That house was built on purpose to show in what an exceeding small compass comfort may be packed."

That is Miss Mitford's miniature of her village home. Seeking it to-day, the literary pilgrim would be sadly disappointed if he carried this description in his mind. The walls have been stuccoed—that ugliest of make-believes—and a wooden sign THE MITFORD springs from between the windows in an attempt—honest enough, no doubt—to compete with its neighbour THE SWAN, the sign of which swings all a-creak over the garden-wall. It has lost its cottage aspect, the windows are modern and even the chimney-pots have been replaced by up-to-date pottery contrivances and a zinc contraption which tries to look ornamental but is not—in striking contrast to the village shop next door which is still the village shop as described by Miss Mitford, "multifarious as a bazaar; a repository for bread,

shoes, tea, cheese, tape, ribands, and bacon"; full of that delightfully mixed odour, a pot-pourri of eatables and wearables, which always characterizes such establishments; proudly ruled by a Brownlow, one of a line of Brownlows unbroken from long before Miss Mitford's day.

Inside, *The Mitford* is less of a disappointment, for most of the rooms remain unchanged, and one quickly sees how truly its delighted owner limned it when she wrote of its angles and in-and-out-ness. Unhappily the garden behind has been spoiled by the erection of a large hall wherein the gospel is preached, light refreshments may be partaken of, and the youth of the village assemble o' nights to tighten their muscles on trapeze and horizontal bar. In Miss Mitford's day they achieved this end by following the plough—but other times other manners, and we are not for blaming them altogether. The pity is—and it is our only grumble—that when that truly noble philanthropist, William Isaac Palmer, conceived the notion of honouring Miss Mitford's memory by preserving her residence, he did not insist on a restoration which would have perpetuated the external, as well as the internal, features of the cottage.

Was *Our Village* its author's announcement to all and sundry, that come what might, whether of want, drudgery, or disillusionment, she could still carry her head high, look the world in the face—

Miss Mitford's Cottage at Three Mile Cross, as it is to-day (1913), with the sign of the *Swan Inn* on the one hand, and Brownlow's shop on the other.

and smile? Probably it was. A strong case can be made out for the view that, apart altogether from her love of rurality, *Our Village* was a deliberate glorification of the simple life which had been forced upon her, a deliberate pronouncement that Home was still Home, though it had been transferred from the magnificence of Bertram House with its retinue of servants, to an extremely humble cottage set between a village "general" on the one side and a village inn upon the other.

With all the success which now seemed to crowd upon our author, the year was not without its anxieties for, shortly after her mother's recovery, her father was taken suddenly ill and, as was his wont on such occasions, required a great deal of attention. He made a fairly speedy recovery, however, and in July we read of him and Mrs. Mitford taking exercise in a "pretty little pony-chaise" the acquisition of which the daughter proudly records—it was a sign, however slight, of amended fortunes. Late in the year, Dr. Mitford had a relapse and became seriously ill, and even when convalescent was left so weak that he was a source of considerable anxiety to his wife and daughter. This illness must have convinced Miss Mitford that it would be futile to count upon her father as a bread-winner, and that conviction seems to have spurred her to work even harder than before. The *Cromwell and Charles* play still simmered

in her mind, while there were a "thousand and one articles for annuals" to be written, together with the working-up of a new tragedy to be called *Inez de Castro*. Not satisfied with all that, she wrote in the July to William Harness, asking whether he could influence Campbell, then editing the *New Monthly Magazine*, to engage for a series—"Letters from the Country," or something of that sort—"altogether different, of course, from *Our Village* in the scenery and the *dramatis personae*, but still something that might admit of description and character, and occasional story, without the formality of a fresh introduction to every article. If you liked my little volume well enough to recommend me conscientiously, and are enough in that prescient editor's good graces to secure such an admission, I should like the thing exceedingly."

Talfourd wrote urging her to a novel, but this she wisely declined, and commenced to work, in great haste on still another tragedy which had been suggested by a re-reading of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. It was no new project, for she had written of it "in strict confidence" to Sir William Elford more than a year before, but it had been left to lie fallow until an opportunity arose for its execution. When the suggestion was made to Macready he at once saw the possibilities in the theme and promised to give the play his best consideration, although he made the significant suggestion

that not only should the author's name be kept a dead secret, but that the play should be produced under a man's name because the newspapers of the day were so unfair to female writers.

Luckily the haste with which she had started on *Rienzi* soon subsided, and it was not ready until 1826 when Macready took it and the Cromwellian play with him on an American tour, promising to do nothing with either unless they could be produced in a manner satisfactory to the author. The original intention had been to produce *Rienzi* at Covent Garden that year, but the idea was abandoned.

In the meantime preparations were well advanced for a second series of *Our Village*, " my bookseller having sent to me for two volumes more." Eventually the series extended to five volumes, the publication of which ranged over the years 1824 and 1832. Of these volumes there appeared, from time to time, a number of most eulogistic reviews, particularly noticeable among them being those of " Christopher North " in the *Noctes Ambrosianae* of *Blackwood's Magazine*. In reviewing the third volume he wrote :—" The young gentlemen of England should be ashamed o' theirsells fo' lettin' her name be Mitford. They should marry her whether she wull or no, for she would mak baith a useful and agreeable wife. That's the best creetishism on her warks "—a criticism as amusing as it was true.

CHAPTER XVIII

MACREADY AND *RIENZI*

IN the previous chapter we mentioned that *Rienzi* was not ready until 1826 and that its production at Covent Garden during that year was postponed because of a disagreement between Macready and Young. As a matter of fact the play was finished to the mutual satisfaction of its author, and her friends Talfourd and Harness, early in 1825, but when submitted to Macready he would only accept it on condition that certain rather drastic alterations were made. In this he was perfectly justified for, be it remembered, he was not only an actor of high rank but a critic of remarkable ability—a combination of scholar and actor which caused him to be consulted on every point connected with the drama and whose judgment was rarely wrong. Upon hearing his decision Miss Mitford appears to have lost her composure—we will charitably remind ourselves that she had put much labour and thought into this play—and to have rushed off to consult the two friends who, having read the play, had already pronounced it ready for

presentation. Upon hearing Macready's suggestions Harness was considerably piqued, the more so as in addition to his clerical duties, he was, at this time, enjoying a considerable reputation as a dramatic critic, his writings in the magazines being eagerly looked for and as eagerly read when they appeared. There is no doubt that he, backed up by Talfourd, counselled Miss Mitford not to adopt Macready's suggestions, but Macready was not the man to brook interference from outsiders and told Miss Mitford that not only must she alter the play in accordance with his views, but without delay if she required him to produce it. This naturally placed the author in an awkward position for she knew, as Macready knew, that he was the person for whom the play had been written and that, did he refuse it, there was no other person on the English stage who could, by any chance, do justice to it. To refuse his request would mean a serious loss to her, and so, humiliated for the moment, she set to work in great haste to carry out Macready's wishes. It was done with an ill grace, for it seemed to Miss Mitford as so much unnecessary labour, especially as critics like Talfourd and Harness had said so. It was unfortunate that, in her bitterness, she overlooked the fact that Macready was, under the circumstances, entitled to every consideration, seeing he had most at stake in the matter of reputation, etc.

The story of this little breeze got about—possibly it only reached the ears of a few—but it got about, and some person, some evil-disposed person, fully cognizant of the feud which existed between Kemble and Macready wrote an open letter "To Charles Kemble, Esq., and R. W. Ellison, Esq., On the Present State of the Stage," in which the writer urged these gentlemen to exercise themselves and prevent the Drama from "going to the dogs," suggesting the cause of and offering a remedy for the degeneration. The article was published in *Blackwood's Magazine* for June, 1825, and bore indubitable evidence of having been written by some person possessed of an extraordinarily intimate knowledge of Miss Mitford and her affairs. It began :—"Gentlemen,—It will, I fear, appear to you as somewhat officious that a stranger, possessing no other skill in the mysteries of theatrical politics than the constant perusal of every play bill, and a very frequent seat in the middle of the pit can afford him, should thus attempt to call away your thoughts from the many anxious and perplexing occupations in which you are engaged, and demand your attention to his unsolicited advice on the management of Covent Garden and Drury Lane." Having thus introduced himself the writer proceeded to animadvert on what he asserted was the decline in the public taste for the legitimate drama, instancing the fact that the managers had been forced to intro-

duce variety shows in order to keep up the receipts; and he went on to say that "the present depressed state of the national drama is the fault of your GREAT ACTORS—I mean of your *soi-distant* GREAT ACTORS—of Messrs. Kean, Young and Macready." The arrogant pretensions of these gentlemen were such as not to allow an author to tell his story exactly as he conceived it. "Would any play so written, have a chance of being represented?" proceeded the writer, arguing that it would not because these actors refused to play any but the hero and insisted on the author keeping down the minor rôles.

"Are you not compelled to sacrifice the interest of the author which ought to be your first concern, whether you consider your duty to the public or yourselves, to the caprice and absurd vanity of your principal performers? The author must obey the directions of the performer; the whole order and process of the work is reversed; and the dramatist is expected to mould his character to fit the actor, instead of the actor modelling his preparation to the conception of the author."

Up to this point the article, though offensive to the actors named, was nothing more than the outburst of a man who might be voicing a public grievance; but he continued in a strain which proved at once that he was something more than a lover of and regular attendant at

the play—that he was indeed in the confidence of one, at least, of the authors he was championing. "The history of the lately rejected tragedy of *Rienzi* is strikingly illustrative of the evils that attend the operation of the present system. The authoress, a person not a little distinguished in the literary world, had selected, for the exercise of her talent, a passage of history which Gibbon has recommended as peculiarly calculated for dramatic representation. The plot was completed and shown to Mr. Macready. He was delighted with the production. The chief part was very effective both in language and situation, and only required a very few and slight alterations to render it worthy the abilities of any of the *great* actors. He wished an entirely new first act; this was indispensable; that *Rienzi* might be introduced striking to the earth an injurious patrician, as Moses smote the Egyptian, because this circumstance had peculiarly pleased Mr. Macready's fancy when a boy at school. To make room for the introduction of this important incident, the second and third acts, to the great injury of the general interest and original arrangement of the tragedy, were to be compressed into one. The fifth act, which had been framed in the most strict conformity with the truth of History, was to be re-written; that the character of *Rienzi* might, to the very dropping of the curtain, hold its paramount station on the stage.

"All these alterations were to be *made in a fortnight.* The authoress was then to return to town with the play and superintend in person the rehearsals and the *getting-up* of the piece; but at all events the work must be ready *in a fortnight.* In a fortnight the play was mangled and distorted, and fitted to Mr. Macready's exaggerated and melo-dramatic measures of performing; the author arrived in London to attend the bringing-out of the play; she called on Mr. Macready with the manuscript; to her utter astonishment, he received her with the greatest coolness:—'There was no hurry for the play. The managers had another piece at the theatre, which must at all events be produced first.'"

Having thus divulged details of a most intimate character—circumstantial to a degree—the writer proceeded to argue that this sort of treatment must make authors of the front rank give up dramatic work in disgust, and then wound up with the suggestion that if these great actors, with their absurd mannerisms, refused to abide by a code which would banish the present bad state of affairs, then let them go to the country and in twelve months they would be completely forgotten.

It will be readily conceded that the article was extremely offensive towards Macready, and, as he afterwards maintained, very damaging too. He claimed that the damage it made to his

reputation resulted in the reduction of his income by one-half and that it made him seriously consider an immediate retirement from the stage—a course which he abandoned only because of his children and their dependence upon him.

The article was an anonymous one, signed "Philo-Dramaticus" and by reason of the inner knowledge it revealed of what were unquestionably private conversations between Miss Mitford and Macready, suspicion fell on William Harness. Taxed with its authorship, he denied the accusation and was not believed. The subject was one upon which every one was talking; in club-land and in stage-land the question was being continually asked: "Who wrote the *Blackwood* article?"

Poor Macready was sorely wounded and wrote to Miss Mitford. The letter reached her at a time when she was suffering from an abscess, confined to her bed. She dreaded these embroilments; she was for peace; but in this case she was, to some extent, to blame in not acting on Macready's advice, without seeking the further advice of her friends. Macready now desired to learn from her whether she knew the author of the malignant article, and whether she had authorized the person to write so in her behalf. The situation was difficult; how to answer these queries she knew not. That she knew, or suspected, the author, is without a doubt for she must have written to that person on the point.

In her extremity she got her mother to write to their mutual friend Talfourd and since it is so important we quote it in full :—

"My dear Friend,—I am obliged to make use of my mother's hand to write to you having been for a week past confined to my bed with an abscess which prevents me turning on either side—it proceeds from neglected inflammation, I having taken it for a boil—There is no danger I believe although much fever and very great pain. The letter from Mr. Macready which I got arrived this morning—I have not answered it, nor shall I until I hear from you—What can I say ? You will see from the enclosed note (*which I send in strict confidence*) he wrote the article. I suspected William Harness and I asked him and you see what he says—What can I say ? The statement, however inaccurate in trifling matters, is yet substantially true *as you will know*—although it is possible that had I behaved with more patience and submission (and I most sincerely wish I had) the result might have been different—It is very rarely that a quarrel takes place between two persons without some touch of blame on either side—and a sick bed is not a place to deny one's faults —Still the statement is substantially true and was undoubtedly derived from my own information—in which is bitterness of disappointment —although the publication was so far from

being authorized by me that I do not know anything that ever gave me more pain, but what can I do? I cannot disavow my kind and zealous friend William Harness—I cannot disavow that part of the statement which is true—and nothing less than an entire disavowal would satisfy Mr. Macready, yet God knows how I dread one of his long narratives—What can I do? I have had to-day another most pleasant note from Mr. Harness—They are delighted with *Charles I*—Mr. Hope read it without laying down and said: 'It was a very fine play—that Charles was excellent, and Cromwell excellent, the Queen very good and the action quite sufficient.' This is very pleasant from the author of *Anastatius*—William does not say a word about Cromwell's cant, and if he, the clergyman, does not mind it, I should hope that George Colman[1] would not, especially as it is now a high tory play. I shall tell William to send the MS. to your house or Chambers (*which?*) as soon as I know you are returned.

"It is certainly quite a new thing especially Cromwell—For in spite of my having written Charles *up* as much as possible, Oliver is the life of the piece—God bless you my dear friend—

"Kind regards from all—

"Ever yours,

"M. R. M."

[1] George Colman the Younger, Examiner of Plays (1824–1836).

"Could you write to Mr. M.? Would that be prudent? I don't know that it would—He evidently wants a complete disavowal—I wonder what he means to do—Do write me your advice most minutely—And pray forgive the trouble."

Dismissing from our minds that portion which deals with "Charles I" and what the critics thought of it and confining ourselves to the other matter, we shall plainly see that Miss Mitford's suspicions as to the author had undergone a change by her receipt of the note from the real culprit and as she mentions her original suspicion regarding William Harness we may permissibly infer that he and the culprit were not one and the same. What Talfourd did with the note which was submitted to him in strict confidence is not known to us. Probably he returned it to Miss Mitford. In any case the letter from which we took our copy bore no clue, and the identity of the person who wrote the offending article cannot therefore be revealed. It is, however, quite clear from the postscript that Miss Mitford was apprehensive lest Macready should resort to law and that is a view which is strengthened by her appeal to Talfourd, who was a lawyer, to write his advice most minutely.

Whether Miss Mitford ever replied to Macready, and, if so, what was its purport, are questions which we can only surmise from a statement,

made by Macready, some years later, but we do know that, for many years after, the great actor nursed a grievance against Miss Mitford and cherished a bitter resentful feeling against Harness, believing the latter to be the person who had written the *Blackwood* article. In his *Diary*, after an interval of eleven years—i.e. February, 1836—recalling his endeavours to be of service to Miss Mitford he writes of her as requiting him "by libel and serious injury," while throughout that and the following year are many entries containing disparaging remarks about her and her "inability to write a play."

Of Harness, in this same *Diary*, he wrote still more bitterly. "I believe the Rev. Mr. Harness was among my slanderers at the time" is a reference to the old grievance, written under date June 30, 1835. In the July following he classes Harness with those "who gain their livelihood and draw their gratifications from the imagined triumphs of their envious and malignant nature"; in March, 1836, he writes of Harness' "blackguardism and rascality" and so on, frequently through the *Diary* until January 3, 1839. On this day Harness called on him by appointment to discuss a play by Mrs. Butler (Fanny Kemble) and, after the business was transacted, Macready detained him by saying there was another matter on which he wished to speak with him. "I observed to him that

whatever faults of character might be ascribed to me, I was incapable of doing any one an injury wittingly; that my notions of honour and virtue, such as they were, were strictly revered by me, and if I had done him a wrong, I held myself bound to expatiate [*sic*] it in every possible way. I then mentioned to him the libellous article which in June, 1825, had been written against me in *Blackwood's Magazine;* the effect it had had in raising *the Press* against me; the partial contradiction that Miss Mitford had given it. . . . He was evidently much embarrassed and seemed to suffer much; his mode of expressing himself was confused and *rambling;* he said that he must acknowledge that he was inculpated so far as that he had heard the story told by Miss Mitford, and had communicated it to the writer of the article, but that he had not written it. . . . I told him that I was very glad to hear that he was not the author, as I was happy to think well of all men, and was very sorry that I had suspected him of the fact. He was going away, when he turned back, having passed the door, and said, 'I think we ought to shake hands.' I gave him my hand, saying, 'I was very happy to do so,' and we parted. My heart was much lighter, and I fear his was *much, very much* heavier, as it is evident, though not the author, that he was deeply implicated in that shocking transaction —that assassination of my character. I think

of him with perfect charity, and with the most entire and cheerful forgiveness." [1]

Thus ended this extraordinary and lengthy feud begotten of a trifling incident which unwisdom magnified. Truly Miss Mitford might justly doubt the proverb that "in multitude of counsellors there is safety." It was a sorry business in which neither of the participants can be said to have shone.

[1] *The Diaries of William Charles Macready*, 1833–1851, edited by William Toynbee, London: Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1912, 2 vols.

CHAPTER XIX

A SLAVE OF THE LAMP

THE success of *Our Village* was really astonishing—it had entirely caught the public fancy. As proof of this we find in a letter to Sir William Elford, dated February 19, 1825, the statement that "Columbines and children have been named after Mayflower [one of her favourite dogs]; stage coachmen and postboys point out the localities; schoolboys deny the possibility of any woman's having written the cricket-match without schoolboy help; and such men as Lord Stowell send to me for a key." In addition to all this proof of popularity it is fairly evident that Campbell, who had originally thought the sketches not dignified enough for the pages of his *New Monthly*, must have relented somewhat, for in the same year she sent him two articles to the care of Mr. Colburn. This was probably due to the representations of William Harness, to whom, it will be remembered, Miss Mitford addressed herself on the matter.

Then, not to be outdone in loyal devotion to his friend, the woman of the hour, Haydon painted

her portrait and exhibited it among portraits of other celebrities of the year. It was not a flattering likeness—a reproduction of it is given in these pages—and its reception, although not particularly hostile, was not altogether friendly. Haydon's enemies—and he had many—sniggered and passed on; Miss Mitford's friends nearly all commiserated her. "Now to the portrait," says she in a letter to her friend, Mrs. S. C. Hall. "One friend of mine used to compare it to a cook-maid of sixty, who had washed her dishes and sat down to mend her stockings; another to Sir John Falstaff in the disguise of the old woman of Brentford; and a third to Old Bannister, in *Moll Flagon*. I have not myself seen it since it was finished, but there must have been something very formidable about it to put such comparisons into people's heads." With her usual good-nature she would not suffer Haydon or his work to be maligned, and so was kept well occupied in defending him.

"As for the picture," she wrote to Mrs. Hofland, "I shall always value it most exceedingly as a high honour, and a great kindness, from such a man." To Sir William Elford, who, above most other people, might hear the truth, she wrote:—"It seemed a strong, unflattered likeness—one that certainly would not be very calculated to feed a woman's vanity, or to cure the public of the general belief that authoresses are and must be frights. But really I don't think it much

Mary Russell Mitford—The "Cook-Maid" portrait.
(From a painting by B. R. Haydon, 1825.)

uglier than what I see every day in the looking-glass; and I especially forbid you from answering this observation by any flattery or anything whatsoever.

"I am sorry that the portrait is not more complimentary, because it vexes my father to hear it so much abused, as I must confess it is, by everybody but Miss J——, and the artist, who maintain that it is a capital likeness—quite a woman of genius, and so forth. Now, my dear friend, I entreat and implore you not to mention to any one what I say. I would not have Mr. Haydon know it for worlds. It was a present, in the first place, and certainly a very kind and flattering attention; and, in the second, my personal feelings for him would always make the picture gratifying to me for his sake were it as ugly as Medusa."

Throughout the correspondence of this (1825) and succeeding years there is a constant reference to a projected novel—in a letter to William Harness, dated April, 1825, Miss Mitford actually gave a complete outline of the plot—but, sandwiched between the information that the story was progressing, there were frequent hints that the writer was finding the task a little beyond her powers and—were the truth told—her inclinations. It was to the Drama she turned, believing that there only could she win laurels and—what was more to the point, just then—a freedom from want and care for those she loved.

Her Tragedy of *Charles I* was constantly being worked upon, for she was hoping that Kemble would be able to produce it at Covent Garden early in the next year, but in this, as in all other literary work—it was the penalty exacted by popularity—she was much hindered by callers —" deuce take 'em," she wrote, " for I am fairly worn off my feet and off my tongue." Furthermore she could never resist the fascination of letter-writing and, as she could never bring herself to the inditing of a short note—the heavy postal-charges of those days would have made such a thing appear as the height of extravagance —her epistles were generally very lengthy and must have taken up much valuable time. One of her letters to Haydon, during this year, contains a most amusing defence of her own spinster condition. " I have a theory, very proper and convenient for an old maid, that the world is overpeopled, and always hear with some regret of every fresh birth. I hold old maids and bachelors —especially old maids, for an obvious reason— to be the most meritorious and patriotic class of his Majesty's subjects ; and I think the opinion seems gaining ground. Three persons in this neighbourhood especially, all friends of mine, are staunch in the creed ; only, unluckily, their practice does not quite accord with their principles. The first, an old maid herself, I caught last week in the act of presiding over a dozen of country-town ladies, cutting out baby-linen for a

charity—'The Maternal Society,' save the mark! Bounties upon babies! The second, an admiral of the last edition, called on me on Saturday with a very rueful face to announce the birth of a daughter (he has a pretty young wife and six children under eight years old).—'Well,' said I, 'it must be endured.' 'Yes,' said he, 'but who would have thought of its being a girl!' The third, a young married woman, was brought to bed this very morning of twins—a catastrophe which I have been predicting to her this month past."

In the autumn, the play of *Charles I* was at last finished and despatched to Kemble for his consideration. Having read it, he wrote informing the author that it was "admirable, though somewhat dangerous," and that he had sent it for perusal to the licenser, George Colman, junior. This official took three weeks to consider the MS. and at length wrote to say "that, in consequence of the exceedingly delicate nature of the subject and incidents of *Charles the First*, he had received instructions to send the manuscript to the Lord Chamberlain" (The Duke of Montrose], "that he might himself judge, on perusal, of the safety of granting a licence." The author had already suffered so much from the jealousies of rival actors that she viewed this new obstacle —the possibility of trouble with the Licenser of Plays—with the utmost apprehension. It was one thing to have her production delayed through

the incompatibilities of actors—those could be overcome, in time—but to feel that her work bore within it matter for prohibition altogether was a totally different thing. It meant that she, to whom labour and time meant so much, just now, might labour for months, valuable months, only to find her offspring condemned and killed at birth. And, as she rightly argued, if she had offended in the case of *Charles*, she might offend with other plays. The problem was: how she was to avoid such a contingency in future? and so she wrote off to William Harness, asking whether he would advise her to write the Licenser on the point. "I have a good mind to write to Mr. Colman and ask. I would, if I knew any way of getting at him. Certainly I mean no harm—nor did I in *Charles*; and the not licensing that play will do great harm to my next, by making me timid and over careful. . . . You cannot imagine how perplexed I am. There are points in my domestic situation too long and too painful to write about. The terrible improvidence of one dear parent—the failure of memory and decay of faculty in that other who is still dearer, cast on me a weight of care and of fear that I can hardly bear up against. Give me your advice. Heaven knows, I would write a novel, as every one tells me to do, and as, I suppose, I must do at last, if I had not the feeling of inability and of failure so strong within me that it would be scarcely possible to succeed

against such a presentiment. And to fail there would be so irremediable! But it will be my lot at last."

Harness's advice was that Colman should be written to, and as by that time the Lord Chamberlain had definitely refused to license the *Charles I* play, Miss Mitford also embodied in her letter a request to be informed whether it was possible to alter that play in such a manner as would make it licensable. This letter was conveyed to Colman through the medium of a mutual friend, a Mr. Rowland Stephenson, to whom a reply was immediately forthcoming. It will be apparent from a perusal of this reply that Miss Mitford must have based her plea for information on the fact that her domestic affairs rendered the success of her work a more than pressing necessity. Dated November 28, 1825, and written from Brompton Square, Mr. Colman's letter was as follows :—

"My dear Sir,—

"It is much to be regretted that Miss Mitford has employed her time unprofitably when so amiable a motive as that of assisting her family has induced her to exercise her literary talents; but it would be idle and ungenerous to flatter her with hopes which there is no prospect of fulfilling.

"My official opinion of her tragedy is certainly unfavourable to the author's interests. I was,

however, so far from wishing it to prejudice the Lord Chamberlain, that the play was submitted to his perusal at my suggestion. He therefore formed his own judgment upon it and decidedly refused to license its performance.

" As to alterations—the fact is, that the subject of this play and the incidents it embraces are fatal in themselves—they are an inherent and incurable disease—the morbid matter lies in the very bones and marrow of the historical facts, and defies eradication. Indeed it would be a kind of practical bull to permit a detailed representation of Charles's unhappy story on a public stage, when his martyrdom is still observed in such solemn silence that the London theatres are actually closed and all dramatic exhibitions whatever suspended on its anniversary.

" I give Miss Mitford full credit for the harmlessness of her intentions, but mischief may be unconsciously done, as a house may be set on fire by a little innocent in the nursery."

Miss Mitford's only comment on this to William Harness was, " Is not this a precious *morceau?* But there is no use in contending." Then continuing her letter, in which she congratulated him on the publication of his edition of Shakespeare's works, she reverted to the troubles at home and fnrnishes the first indication we have of the senility of Mrs. Mitford. " Poor mamma's failure of faculty is very peculiar. You might see her

twenty times for twenty minutes, and yet not perceive it; or, on the other hand, she might in one twenty minutes show it a hundred times. She mistakes one person for another—one thing for another—misjoins facts—misreports conversations—hunts for six hours together after a pincushion which she has in her pocket, or a thimble on her finger, and is totally absorbed in the smallest passing objects. *This* is, in one respect, fortunate, since it prevents her from foreseeing greater evils. But then again, it deters her from supporting me in any effort to mitigate them. So that from her incapacity, and the absolute inertness of my father in such matters—an obstinacy of going on in the same way which I cannot describe—I find myself compelled to acquiesce in a way of living which, however inexpensive, is still more so than we can afford, for fear of disturbing and, perhaps, killing her. If she were herself she would rather live on dry bread in a garret than run in debt; and so would I, merely as a question of personal comfort."

This letter, as will be seen, bore no evasive terms regarding Dr. Mitford; indeed, Miss Mitford knew quite well that any attempt to hoodwink William Harness concerning her father's habits of life was only so much wasted ink and energy. In any case it is no edifying spectacle here presented—an improvident father obstinately persisting in a manner of living which present income did not justify; an invalid mother

whose intellect was so weak that she had not the power to notice that things were reverting to the old bad ways; a daughter, struggling to make ends meet, to keep the improvident one satisfied and to withhold from the invalid the truth which to know might mean her death; and, to crown all, the fruit of her labours rejected at the eleventh hour. Was ever woman so stricken?

But her cup of bitterness was not yet full, for in December her publisher, George Whittaker, stopped payment, though, fortunately, the embarrassment was only temporary. Nevertheless it presented to the distracted woman a new and hitherto unthought-of possibility whereby her endeavours to gain a livelihood might be frustrated.

So pressing were the needs of the household that early in the year 1826 she paid a hurried visit to town in the hope of collecting some of the money due to her, but the result was very meagre. Fortunately William Harness was able to come to the rescue by acceding to her suggestion that she should collaborate with him in the production of some rather elaborate charades for which she had a market in *Blackwood's Magazine*. The idea of the charades was first suggested to Mr. Harness by some of his young lady friends at Hampstead, where he was then living. They, tired of the rather stereotyped form of charades, asked him to furnish them with something requiring a certain amount of care in the production,

with the result that he introduced a trifling dramatic scene and dialogue to represent each word. The fame of these Hampstead charades soon spread and as a result came Miss Mitford's suggestion that she might place her dramatic skill at his command and that their united efforts should then go to *Blackwood's*. At first Mr. Harness demurred to the idea of magazine publication and counselled his friend to keep her charades until she could embody them in the novel about which she was continually writing. Her wish prevailed, however, and Harness undertook to forward the "copy" on to Blackwood's, the proprietor of which was willing to pay ten guineas a sheet for these contributions. Following these, Miss Mitford entertained the project of writing an opera—there was no end to her schemes, though not all of them came to anything.

"I want to write a grand opera on the story of *Cupid and Psyche*, with Weber's music. Just look at the story, and see how dramatic it is—how full of situation and variety, both for dialogue and poetry, for music and scenery; . . . I wish with all my heart you would ask Mr. Kemble whether, if I were to put all my strength into such an opera, he could get Weber to compose the music, and whether Weber would like the subject. It has seized my imagination most strongly, and there would be no fear of the licenser in this case."

The October of 1826 saw the second volume of *Our Village* published—Whittaker having survived his business troubles; a small play, *Gaston de Blondeville* awaiting Kemble's reading; a volume of *Dramatic Scenes* preparing for the press, and the author anticipating an immediate visit to town to witness the long-delayed production of *Foscari*. For this event the Doctor and his daughter took apartments at 45, Frith Street, and these, Miss Mitford wrote, were delightful. The *Foscari* was to be produced on Saturday, November 5, and as the visitors arrived in town on November 1, they employed the interval in witnessing various plays and in working themselves into a fever of excitement lest Kemble should not recover from an attack of hoarseness and lest the Duke of York—then seriously ill—should succumb, in which latter case, of course, the theatre would be closed. But the Duke did not die and, as luck would have it, the November number of *Blackwood* contained a delightful review of *Our Village* and a laudatory notice of the author. This was all to the good. It stimulated the public interest, and the consequence was a very full house on that auspicious Saturday. How delightful it is to read of well-deserved success. Miss Mitford's letter home to her mother is infectiously exhilarating. It was written after the play, late on the Saturday night, so that no time might be lost in the conveyance of the news and in order to

prevent the Doctor from rushing off then and there to Reading and home to carry the news in person.

"I cannot suffer this parcel to go to you, my dearest mother, without writing a few lines to tell you of the complete success of my play. It was received, not merely with rapturous applause, but without the slightest symptom of disapprobation, from beginning to end. We had not a single 'order' in the house, so that from first to last the approbation was sincere and general. William Harness and Mr. Talfourd are both quite satisfied with the whole affair, and my other friends are half crazy. Mrs. Trollope,[1] between joy for my triumph and sympathy with the play, has cried herself half blind. I am, and have been, perfectly calm, and am merely tired with the great number of friends whom I have seen to-day. . . . Mrs. Morgan, Hannah Rowe, and my own darling Marianne,[2] who stayed with me during the whole of the time that the play was acting, which I passed at George Robins's. Marianne is going with me on Monday to the tragedy. Of course I shall now stay rather longer than I intended, having the copyright of the play and the volume of *Dramatic Sketches* to sell, if I can. I quite long to hear how you, my

[1] Mrs. Frances Trollope, a noted author, died 1863.

[2] Marianne Skerrett—a connection of Macready's. She subsequently held a position in Queen Victoria's household, as superintendent of the Queen's dressers.

own dearest darling, have borne the suspense and anxiety consequent on this affair, which, triumphantly as it has turned out, was certainly a very nervous business. They expect the play to run three times a week till Christmas."

It is an interesting circumstance to note that the Epilogue—then considered indispensable—arrived so late that the play proceeded without it, and the manager proposed its omission altogether. "It was simply an added danger," he said; "could do no good in the case of a failure, and stopped the applause when the play was a success." It was the first occasion on which such a decision had been given and acted upon.

The proposed remuneration for *Foscari* was excellent, and the copyright of the play, together with the volume of *Dramatic Scenes*, were sold for a good figure to Whittaker. The latter work Miss Mitford had to complete, and in writing to Sir William Elford, thanking him for congratulations on *Foscari's* success, she told him: "I am just returned from passing a brilliant fortnight in London . . . and heard a great deal more literary news than I have head to remember or time to tell. For, alas! my dear Sir William, the holiday time of our correspondence is past. I am now a poor slave of the lamp, chained to the desk as a galley slave to his oar, and am at present triply engaged; for the monthly period-

ical publications, which I have been too much engaged to supply ; to the Annuals, which, to my sorrow, are just on, and have begun dunning me again ; and to my own bookseller, who has bought my *Dramatic Scenes*."

CHAPTER XX

MACREADY'S RESERVATION, AND LORD LYTTON'S PRAISE

NOTWITHSTANDING the success of *Foscari* and the apparently overwhelming literary output of its author during the year 1826, it is fairly certain that the financial position of the household at Three Mile Cross remained as before. There had been, of course, the acquisition of the pony and chaise—originally purchased so that Dr. and Mrs. Mitford might take exercise in a form they both enjoyed and, in the case of the latter, certainly required—but this, so far as can be ascertained, was the only extravagance in expenditure that had been indulged in. The production of *Foscari*—if the run lasted for twenty performances—was to bring in £400, and the copyright of the play and the sale of the *Dramatic Scenes* was fixed at £150, a total of £550 as estimated income at the end of 1826. Then there were the regular payments from *Blackwood's*, and these, together with the odd items gathered from the " Annuals "—the editors of which were actually dunning Miss Mitford for contributions

—must have brought the receipts up to considerably over £600, even if we estimate most modestly. Such an income for a family of three persons, plus the housekeeper, maid and odd-man for stable and garden, living in a glorified cottage in a tiny village, seems to us to represent a very comfortable sum upon which to exist for, let us say, twelve months.

And yet in June, 1827, we find Miss Mitford writing to a friend: "We are as poor as poor can be and are ourselves living on credit." It is true that she added, "we have only received one hundred pounds from the theatre," but, even so, that would leave an estimated balance of £300—a sum which would scarcely justify such a family in living on credit. Where did the money go? We confess to being nonplussed, and can only suggest that the extravagance and improvidence of Dr. Mitford were still to the fore and still being acquiesced in and glossed over by his daughter, for Mrs. Mitford could hardly be held to blame now that she was unfitted to exercise any control whatever over domestic matters.

These are problems which will never be solved, but of this we can be certain: that Miss Mitford was still working as hard as ever to keep the family ship afloat. A letter to William Harness, written in March, 1827, gives an outline of a new play, *Inez de Castro*, upon which, after consulting her friends, she worked diligently, and was able

to send it up to Kemble during the year 1828.

In addition to this there was in active preparation a third volume of *Our Village*, the publication of which was arranged for by Dr. Mitford in person. To him, then lodging at "Old Betty's Coffee House, behind the new church, Strand," his daughter wrote in February, 1828 :—

"Nothing, my own dearest, was ever more comfortable and satisfactory than the manner in which you have managed this affair. Pray write to George Whittaker directly. Of course we must not take a farthing less than one hundred and fifty pounds, when we are sure of it from such a respectable quarter as Longman's. I never had the slightest hesitation in my liking for that house, except their name for *closeness* ; but certainly this offer is very liberal. You have done the business most excellently—just as I thought you would." (The Doctor was evidently playing off Longman's against his godson.) "God grant you an equal success with the dramatic affair ! I am not the least afraid of your management there. I'll never write a play again, for I daresay Longman's people would give a good price for a novel. If you can, without inconvenience, will you bring me a bottle of eau-de-Cologne ?—this is a piece of extravagance upon the strength of the fifty pounds ; but don't buy anything else. And pray, my darling, get quit of the dogs."

The dramatic affair mentioned in this letter evidently concerned the long-postponed production in London of *Rienzi*, and as Dr. Mitford's prolonged absence in town seemed futile, his daughter wrote, still to the care of "Old Betty's," informing him that she could no longer bear the suspense, and that she had written to Kemble to say that she was coming to town immediately, and would drive at once to his house, where, "if he cannot see me then, I have requested him to leave word when and where he will see me."

The matter was evidently settled and the play arranged to be produced at Drury Lane Theatre on Saturday, October 11. Writing this information to Sir William Elford a week or so before the production, Miss Mitford said: "Mr. Young plays the hero, and has been studying the part during the whole vacation; and a new actress [1] makes her first appearance in the part of the heroine. This is a very bold and hazardous experiment, no new actress having come out in a new play within the memory of man; but she is young, pretty, unaffected, pleasant-voiced, with great sensibility, and a singularly pure intonation—a qualification which no actress has possessed since Mrs. Siddons. Stanfield [2] is painting the new scenes, one of which is an accurate representation of Rienzi's house. This building

[1] Louisa Anne Phillips; she was only sixteen when she made her début.

[2] W. Clarkson Stanfield—the famous marine-painter.

still exists in Rome, and is shown there as a curious relique of the domestic architecture of the Middle Ages. They have got a sketch which they sent for on purpose, and they are hunting up costumes with equal care ; so that it will be very splendidly brought out, and I shall have little to fear, except from the emptiness of London so early in the season. If you know any one likely to be in that great desert so early in the year, I know that you will be so good as to mention me and my tragedy. I do not yet know where I shall be. I think of going to town in about a fortnight, and, if the play succeeds, shall remain there about the same time."

Mrs. S. C. Hall, in her *Memories*, gives us a delightful picture of the flurry and bustle which preceded the *Rienzi* production, a bustle which was accentuated by an alteration of the date to one week earlier. Miss Mitford was up in town superintending the arrangements, lodging meanwhile at the house of her friend, Mrs. Hofland, in Newman Street. " Mrs. Hofland invited us to meet her there one morning. All the world was talking about the expected play, and all the world was paying court to its author.

" ' Mary,' said Mrs. Hofland to her visitors, ' is a little grand and stilted just now. There is no doubt the tragedy will be a great success ; they all say so in the green-room ; and Macready told me it was a wonderful tragedy—an extraordinary tragedy " *for a woman to have written.*"

The men always make that reservation, my dear; they cramp us, my dear, and then reproach us with our lameness; but Mary did not hear it, and I did not tell her. She is supremely happy just now, and so is her father, the doctor. Yes, it is no wonder that she should be a little stilted—such grand people coming to call and invite them to dinner, and all the folk at the theatre down-upon-knee to her—it is such a contrast to her life at Three Mile Cross.'

"'But,' I said, 'she deserves all the homage that can be rendered her—her talents are so varied. Those stories of *Our Village* have been fanned by the pure breezes of "sunny Berkshire," and are inimitable as pictures of English rural life; and she has also achieved the highest walk in tragedy——'

"'For a woman,' put in dear Mrs. Hofland. She had not forgiven our great tragedian—then in the zenith of his popularity—for his ungallant reserve."

It is pleasant to read that Macready could praise this tragedy, although we cannot forget that spiteful entry in his Diary, under date November 24, 1836—"I have no faith in her power of writing a play."

Stilted or not, Miss Mitford was contented to appear in a garb which spoke, all too plainly, of the country cottage and country fashion.

"I certainly was disappointed," continues Mrs. Hall, "when a stout little lady, tightened

up in a shawl, rolled into the parlour in Newman Street, and Mrs. Hofland announced her as Miss Mitford; her short petticoats showing wonderfully stout leather boots, her shawl *bundled* on, and a little black coal-scuttle bonnet—when bonnets were expanding—added to the effect of her natural shortness and rotundity; but her manner was that of a cordial country gentlewoman; the pressure of her fat little hands (for she extended both) was warm; her eyes, both soft and bright, looked kindly and frankly into mine; and her pretty, rosy mouth, dimpled with smiles that were always sweet and friendly. At first I did not think her at all 'grand or stilted,' though she declared she had been quite spoilt—quite ruined since she came to London, with all the fine compliments she had received; but the trial was yet to come. 'Suppose—suppose *Rienzi* should be——,' and she shook her head. Of course, in full chorus, we declared that could not be. 'No! she would not spend an evening with us until after the first night; if the play went ill, or even coldly, she would run away, and never be again seen or heard of; if it succeeded——' She drew her rotund person to its full height, and endeavoured to stretch her neck, and the expression of her face assumed an air of unmistakable triumph. She was always pleasant to look at, and had her face not been cast in so broad—so 'outspread'—a mould, she would have been handsome; even with that disadvantage, if her

figure had been tall enough to carry her head with dignity, she would have been so, but she was most vexatiously 'dumpy'; but when Miss Mitford spoke, the awkward effect vanished—her pleasant voice, her beaming eyes and smiles, made you forget the wide expanse of face; and the roly-poly figure, when seated, did not appear really short."

On October 4 *Rienzi* was played—played to crowded houses, with audiences so rapt that a pin might have been heard had one dropped in the house. The author, fearful of failure, dare not witness the first production, but remained near at hand, praying for success from her inmost soul, "for on it hangs the comfort of those far dearer to me than myself." It was Haydon who was the first to bring her the news of success, and it was a message the bearer of which she never forgot.

On October 20 she wrote informing Sir William Elford that "the triumph has been most complete and decisive—the houses crowded—and the attention such as has not been since Mrs. Siddons. How long the run may continue I cannot say, for London is absolutely empty; but even if the play were to stop to-night, I should be extremely thankful—more thankful than I have words to tell; the impression has been so deep and so general. You should have been in London, or seen the newspapers as a whole, to judge of the exceedingly strong sensation that has been produced."

"The reception of this tragedy," wrote George Daniel, the famous critic and Editor of *Cumberland's British Theatre*, "is a proof that, though the public have been wont to feed on garbage, they have no disinclination to wholesome food. . . . If in the character of Rienzi, Miss Mitford has shown that she can write with masculine energy, let Claudia bear witness that her wonted dominion over the heart is still in full force; that, with the power of agitating the soul by the fierce conflict of contending passions, a fine sensibility, a true pathos, a bewitching tenderness, are still her own, to relieve and illumine the dark shadows that veil the mysterious grandeur of the tragic muse.

"The sentiments are just and noble; the language is vigorous, picturesque and poetical.

"It was to be expected that the actor who plays Macbeth and Hamlet with such skill and effect as Mr. Young should be highly successful in Rienzi. His performance was a fine specimen of the Kemble school—chaste, vigorous and grand. Miss Phillips proved herself fully equal to sustain the character of the gentle Claudia. Her excellence lies in the expression of tenderness."

Congratulations poured in upon the author from all quarters, and these, with countless invitations to festivities in her honour, nearly turned her head. Fulfilling a promise made at the Hofland's house to Mrs. Hall, she went to dinner one evening during the run of *Rienzi*, and was,

unconsciously, the cause of much merriment, fortunately suppressed. Mrs. Hall describes her as not appearing to advantage that evening; "her manner was constrained, and even haughty. She got up tragedy looks, which did not harmonize with her naturally playful expression. She seated herself in a high chair, and was indignant at the offer of a footstool, though her feet barely touched the ground; she received those who wished to be introduced to her *en reine*; but such was her popularity just then, that all were gratified. She was most unbecomingly dressed in a striped satin something, neither high nor low, with very short sleeves, for her arms were white and finely formed; she wore a large yellow turban, which added considerably to the size of her head. She had evidently bought the hideous thing *en route*, and put it on, in the carriage, as she drove to our house, for pinned at the back was a somewhat large card, on which were written in large letters, 'VERY CHASTE—ONLY 5*s*. 3*d*.' I had observed several of our party passing behind the chair, whispering and tittering, and soon ascertained the cause. Under pretence of settling her turban, I removed the obnoxious notice; and, of course, she never knew that so many wags had been merry at her cost."

All very amusing; and yet, a picture which cannot fail to evoke our sympathy for the little woman so anxious to enjoy to the full her wonderful hour of success.

The play ran for fifty nights and enjoyed a truly remarkable sale in book form. In view of the popularity of *Rienzi* and, possibly, because she feared it might affect the run in some way, Miss Mitford now begged Kemble to postpone the production of *Inez de Castro* until some future date, to which he, of course, agreed.

Meanwhile, and in the November of the same year—that is, while *Rienzi* was still running—she made preparations towards the writing of a new play, founded on a German story, and to be called *Otto of Wittelsbach.*

Upon her return to Three Mile Cross she was again inundated with congratulations, both personal and written, and this, of course, proved a serious delay to her work, and, incidentally, led to a temporary break in her correspondence with her old friend, Sir William Elford. Conscience-stricken, she sent him a pretty letter—an amusing blend of contrition and excuse—on her birthday.

" Thinking over those whom I love and those who have been kind to me, as one does on these annual occasions, it occurred to me, my dear friend, that I had most unkindly checked your warmhearted interest in my doings. I was very busy—not quite well—and overwhelmed, beyond anything that can be conceived, by letters and visits of congratulation. I am now quite well again ; and though still with much to do—much that I ought to have done to make up—yet, having fairly stemmed the tide of formal com-

pliments, I steal a moment to tell you and your dear circle that *Rienzi* continues prosperous. It has passed the twentieth night, which, you know, insures the payment of four hundred pounds from the theatre (the largest price that any play can gain); and the sale of the tragedy has been so extraordinary, that I am told the fourth edition is nearly exhausted—which, as the publisher told me each edition would consist of at least two thousand, makes a circulation of eight thousand copies in two months. . . . Heaven grant I may ever do as well again! I shall have hard work to write up to my own reputation, for certainly I am at present greatly overrated."

Among the many tributes of praise received by *Rienzi's* author none gave greater delight than the one embodied in Lord Lytton's Preface to his novel, *Rienzi*, which first appeared in 1835. "I cannot conclude," it runs, "without rendering the tribute of my praise and homage to the versatile and gifted Author of the beautiful Tragedy of *Rienzi*. Considering that our hero be the same—considering that we had the same materials from which to choose our several stories—I trust I shall be found to have little, if at all, trespassed upon ground previously occupied. With the single exception of a love-intrigue between a relative of Rienzi and one of the antagonist party, which makes the plot of Miss Mitford's Tragedy, and is little more than an episode in my Romance,

having slight effect on the conduct and none on the fate of the hero, I am not aware of any resemblance between the two works; and even *this* coincidence I could easily have removed, had I deemed it the least advisable; but it would be almost discreditable if I had *nothing* that resembled a performance so much it were an honour to imitate."

CHAPTER XXI

A GREAT SORROW

PROMINENT among the many and varied characteristics of Miss Mitford's life is the remarkable and unfailing interest she ever displayed towards struggling genius. Nothing gave her more pleasure than news of some individual who, possibly humbly born, was making a strenuous fight for fame; while to be brought into personal relationship with the struggler was a circumstance which seemed at once to quicken her mothering instinct, and it would not be long before she became a self-constituted champion, using her influence to secure the interest and support of all who were likely to be of service to her protégé.

For Haydon she had an unfailing regard and would fight his battles with any who dared to disparage him or his work in her hearing. Of Talfourd's achievements she was never tired of talking and writing, even after he had forfeited any claim to her interest by his stupid jealousy. Lough, the sculptor, son of a small farmer in Northumberland, excited her admiration when,

barely two years after he had left his father's cornfields, he achieved fame with his Statue of Milo. And now, following her own success with *Rienzi*, we find her interesting herself in young Lucas, the painter, of whom she wrote to Harness: "He is only twenty-one, was bound to Reynolds, the engraver, and practised the art which he was resolved to pursue, secretly, in his own room, in hours stolen from sleep and needful exercise, and minutes from necessary food. Last July he became his own master, and since then he has regularly painted. Everybody almost that sees his pictures desires to sit, and he is already torn to pieces with business. In short, I expect great things of him. But what I especially like is his character. I have seen nothing in all my life more extraordinary than his union of patience and temper and rationality, with a high and ardent enthusiasm." That was written in the January of 1828. In the following November she wrote to Haydon: "I am now going to tell you something which I earnestly hope will neither vex nor displease you; if it do, I shall grieve most heartily—but I do not think it will. The patron of a young artist of great merit (Mr. Lucas) has made a most earnest request that I will sit to him. He comes here to paint it—and there is a double view; first to get two or three people hereabout to sit to him; next to do him good in London, by having in the Exhibition the portrait of a person whose name will probably

induce people to look at it, and bring the painting into notice. The manner in which this was pressed upon me by a friend to whom I owe great gratitude was such as I really could not refuse—especially as it can by no accident be injurious to your splendid reputation, that an ugly face which you happen to have taken, should be copied by another. There is a project of having the portrait engraved, which would increase the benefit that they anticipate to Mr. Lucas, and would be so far satisfactory to us as it would supersede a villainous print out of some magazine, from a drawing of Miss Drummond's, which is now selling in the shops." To this Haydon good-naturedly replied that he would not be offended and that he should be glad to be of use to Mr. Lucas, or of any service to the print; but, as a matter of fact, he was not at all pleased and was really jealous of the young painter for a while.

Meanwhile the sittings for the Lucas portrait took place, and by January of 1829 the picture was advanced enough for its original to bestow her praise. Sir William Elford was, of course, among the earliest to learn the particulars. "The portrait is said by everybody to be a work of art. It certainly is a most graceful and elegant picture—a very fine piece of colour, and, they say, a very strong likeness. It was difficult, in painting me, to steer between the Scylla and Charybdis of making me dowdy, like one of my own rustic heroines, or dressed out like a tragedy

queen. He has managed the matter with infinite taste, and given to the whole figure the look of a quiet gentlewoman. I never saw a more ladylike picture. The dress is a black velvet hat, with a long, drooping black feather; a claret-coloured high gown; and a superb open cloak of gentianella blue, the silvery fur and white satin lining of which are most exquisitely painted and form one of the most beautiful pieces of drapery that can be conceived. The face is thoughtful and placid, with the eyes looking away —a peculiarity which, they say, belongs to my expression."

Assuming that these millinery and drapery details were understandable to Sir William, the catalogue must have given him something of a shock, for he would assuredly wonder what had come over his little friend, in the first place, to have become possessed of such a heap of finery and, in the second place, to have submitted to being decked out in it.

The truth is that Lady Madelina Palmer—wife of the Reading Member, Fyshe Palmer—had taken a leading part in the arrangement for this portrait and, determined that the author of *Rienzi* should make a brave show, had dressed up the homely figure in some of her own society garments. The effect was worse than that of a parlour-maid masquerading as the mistress, for Miss Mitford had neither the figure nor the artificiality which could set off the bedizenments of

Mary Russell Mitford.
(From a painting by John Lucas, 1829.)

a duke's daughter. Poor Lucas—"the sweet young boy," Miss Mitford afterwards called him—fumed inwardly when he saw what he had to portray, daring not to criticize lest he offend the owner of the clothes, who was near by. He stuck manfully to his task, fretting at the bad taste of the whole thing, only to cancel the picture in the end. Fortunately an engraving of the picture has been preserved, of which we are able to present a copy in these pages. As a picture it is undoubtedly graceful and admirably proportioned, but as regards the *tout ensemble* it must be regarded as a failure.

During the sitting Miss Mitford composed some graceful lines to the painter, which are worthy of quotation here, because apart from their intrinsic value as a poetical tribute, they also contain a piece of self-portraiture most deftly interwoven :—

"To Mr. Lucas

(*Written whilst sitting to him for my Portrait, December*, 1828).

"Oh, young and richly gifted! born to claim
No vulgar place amidst the sons of fame;
With shapes of beauty haunting thee like dreams,
And skill to realize Art's loftiest themes:
How wearisome to thee the task must be
To copy these coarse features painfully;
Faded by time and paled by care, to trace
The dim complexion of this homely face;
And lend to a bent brow and anxious eye
Thy patient toil, thine Art's high mastery.
Yet by that Art, almost methinks Divine,

By touch and colour, and the skilful line
Which at a stroke can strengthen and refine,
And mostly by the invisible influence
Of thine own spirit, gleams of thought and sense
Shoot o'er the careworn forehead, and illume
The heavy eye, and break the leaden gloom:
Even as the sunbeams on the rudest ground
Fling their illusive glories wide around,
And make the dullest scene of Nature bright
By the reflexion of their own pure light."

During the year Dr. Mitford developed a most curious and inexplicable dislike to his daughter's friends and acquaintances. Possibly he was growing tired of the congratulatory callers, but even so, he must surely have recognized that this sort of thing was the penalty exacted of popularity. "My father," she wrote to William Harness, "very kind to me in many respects, very attentive if I'm ill, very solicitous that my garden should be nicely kept, that I should go out with him, and be amused—is yet, so far as art, literature, and the drama are concerned, of a temper infinitely difficult to deal with. He hates and despises them, and all their professors—looks on them with hatred and with scorn; and is constantly taunting me with my 'friends' and my 'people' (as he calls them, reproaching me if I hold the slightest intercourse with author, editor, artist, or actor, and treating with frank contempt every one not of a station in the county. I am entirely convinced that he would consider Sir Thomas Lawrence, Sir Walter Scott, and Mrs.

Siddons as his inferiors. Always this is very painful—strangely painful.

"Since I have known Mr. Cathcart I can say with truth that he has never spoken to me or looked at me without ill-humour; sometimes taunting and scornful—sometimes more harsh than you could fancy. Now, he ought to remember that it is not for my own pleasure, but from a sense of duty, that I have been thrown in the way of these persons; and he should allow for the natural sympathy of similar pursuits and the natural wish to do the little that one so powerless and poor can do to bring merit (and that of a very high order) into notice. It is one of the few alleviations of a destiny that is wearing down my health and mind and spirits and strength—a life spent in efforts above my powers, and which will end in the workhouse, or in a Bedlam, as the body or the mind shall sink first. He ought to feel this; but he does not. I beg your pardon for vexing you with this detail. I do not often indulge in such repining."

It is difficult to read such a letter without experiencing a feeling of intensest indignation against the almost inhuman selfishness of Dr. Mitford, who, content to batten on the fruits of his daughter's industry, would yet make her path more difficult by his unreasonable and capricious jealousy. The incident can only be likened to that of a brute creature biting the hand that feeds him. And what, after all, was

the cause of this cruel conduct? Nothing other than that his daughter was interesting herself in a young actor whose welfare she hoped to promote.

Contrast this episode with one of a few months later, which Miss Mitford was delighted to relate — it showed such admirable traits in the "dear papa's" character, and could not go unrecorded. "Dash has nearly been killed to-day, poor fellow! He got into a rabbit burrow so far that he could neither move backward nor forward; and my father, two men and a boy, were all busy digging for upwards of two hours, in a heavy rain, to get him out. They had to penetrate through a high bank, with nothing to guide them but the poor dog's moans. You never saw any one so full of gratitude, or so sensible of what his master has done for him, as he is. . . . My father was wet to the skin; but I am sure he would have dug till this time rather than any living creature, much less his own favourite dog, should have perished so miserably."

In the tragedy of *Rienzi* there are some fine lines embodied in Rienzi's injunction to his daughter, which we cannot refrain from quoting at this point:—

> "Claudia, in these bad days,
> When men must tread perforce the flinty path
> Of duty, hard and rugged; fail not thou
> Duly at night and morning to give thanks
> To the all-gracious Power, that smoothed the way
> For woman's tenderer feet. She but looks on,

And waits and prays for the good cause, whilst man
Fights, struggles, triumphs, dies ! "

Did we not know that Miss Mitford was incapable of a harsh thought towards her father, we should be inclined to read a satire into these lines. Who smoothed the way for her ? What time had she wherein to wait and pray ? Her days she spent in treading the flinty path of duty, made more rugged and hard by that one who, had he done his duty, would have exerted himself rather in smoothing the way.

Writing to Haydon late in the year to congratulate him on a success, she said :—" Be quite assured that my sympathy with you and with art is as strong as ever, albeit the demonstration have lost its youthfulness and its enthusiasm, just as I myself have done. The fact is that I am much changed, much saddened—am older in mind than in years—have entirely lost that greatest gift of nature, animal spirits, and am become as nervous and good-for-nothing a person as you can imagine. Conversation excites me sometimes, but only, I think, to fall back with a deader weight. Whether there be any physical cause for this, I cannot tell. I hope so, for then perhaps it may pass away ; but I rather fear that it is the overburthen, the sense that more is expected of me than I can perform, which weighs me down and prevents me doing anything. I am ashamed to say that a play bespoken last year at Drury Lane, and wanted by them beyond

measure, is not yet nearly finished. I do not even know whether it will be completed in time to be produced this season. I try to write it and cry over my lamentable inability, but I do not get on. Women were not meant to earn the bread of a family—I am sure of that—there is a want of strength. . . . God bless you and yours! Do not judge of the sincerity of an old friendship, or the warmth of an old friend, by the unfrequency or dulness of her letters."

Added to all this weight of work and the forbearance exacted of her by her father, there was the worry consequent upon Mrs. Mitford's failing health. Judging by the letters of the period it is evident that the mother's condition was growing serious. Her mind was often a blank and, as the winter drew on, there was a recurrence of the asthma which sapped the little strength remaining to her. "My mother, *whom few things touch now*, is particularly pleased," wrote Miss Mitford to William Harness *à propos* of a visit he had promised to pay them, and concerning which she added:—"You don't know how often I have longed to press you to come to us, but have always been afraid; you are used to things so much better, and I thought you would find it dull."

On Boxing-Day, 1829, Mrs. Mitford's condition was very grave, for she was seized with apoplexy, and had to be put to bed. There she lingered hovering between life and death until the morning

of January 2, 1830, when she passed away, in the eightieth year of her age. The account of her last illness and death is amongst the most touching things ever penned by her daughter—to whom sentimentality was abhorrent. It is too long for extensive quotation, but we cannot forbear making a brief extract describing the last sad moments.

"She was gone. I had kissed her dear hand and her dear face just before. She looked sweet, and calm, and peaceful: there was even a smile on her dear face. I thought my heart would have broken, and my dear father's too.

"On Saturday I did not see her; I tried, but on opening the door I found her covered by a sheet, and had not courage to take it down. . . . On Thursday I saw her for the last time, in the coffin, with the dear face covered, and gathered for her all the flowers I could get—chrysanthemums (now a hallowed flower), white, yellow and purple—laurustinus, one early common primrose, a white Chinese primrose, bay and myrtle from a tree she liked, verbena, and lemon-grass also. I put some of these in the coffin, with rosemary, and my dear father put some.

"We kissed her cold hand, and then we followed her to her grave in Shinfield Church, near the door, very deep and in a fine soil, with room above it for her own dear husband and her own dear child. God grant we may tread in her steps! . . . No human being was ever so

devoted to her duties—so just, so pious, so charitable, so true, so feminine, so industrious, so generous, so disinterested, so ladylike—never thinking of herself, always of others—the best mother, the most devoted wife, the most faithful friend. . . . Oh, that I could but again feel the touch of that dear hand! God forgive me my many faults to her, blessed angel, and grant that I may humbly follow in her track! . . . She told Harriet Palmer (of whom she was fond) that she meant to get a guinea, and have her father's old Bible—the little black Bible which she read every day—beautifully bound, with her initials on it, and give it to me. She told me, when *Otto* should be performed, she wanted a guinea—but not why—and would not take it before. It shall be done, blessed saint!"

CHAPTER XXII

"THE WORKHOUSE—A FAR PREFERABLE DESTINY"

"FOR my own part I have plenty that must be done; much connected painfully with my terrible grief; much that is calculated to force me into exertion, by the necessity of getting money to meet the inevitable expenses. Whether it were inability or inertness I cannot tell, but *Otto* is still but little advanced. I lament this of all things *now*; I grieve over it as a fault as well as a misfortune."

So wrote Miss Mitford to William Harness on January 9, 1830, the day following her mother's funeral. And truly there was plenty to be done and she would need all her woman's courage, for now "the weight which Dr. Mitford had divided between two forbearing women had to be borne by one."

A new volume—the fourth—of *Our Village* was now almost ready for publication, for which Whittaker agreed to give £150, and during the month an agent from a publisher had called at Three Mile Cross with a view to arranging for a

work to be entitled *Stories of American Life by American Writers*, which were to be selected and edited, with prefaces by Miss Mitford. The suggested publisher was Colburn. This, of course, necessitated a great deal of labour, in the midst of which the negotiations for the American book nearly fell through by reason of a quarrel between the publisher and his agent.

It was a most trying period, for Dr. Mitford grew more exacting day by day, demanding more and more attention from his daughter, whom he expected—nay, forced—to play cribbage with him until he fell asleep, when, being released, she read and worked far into the night. Then, to make matters worse, the Doctor began to imbibe more wine than was good for him—it will be noticed that his creature comforts did not diminish—and, whilst returning alone from a dinner-party in the neighbourhood, was thrown out of the chaise and the horse and vehicle arrived empty at the cottage in the dead of night. His daughter, who had been waiting for him, made the discovery that he was missing and, rousing the man and servants, they all set off along the road to Shinfield, finding him lying stunned by the roadside a mile away. "Only think," wrote his daughter, "what an agony of suspense it was! Thank Heaven, however, he escaped uninjured, except being stiff from the jar; and I am recovering my nervousness better than I could have expected."

THE AUTHOR OF OUR VILLAGE

Miss Mitford "attended by a printer's devil to whom she is delivering 'copy.'"
(From a sketch in *Fraser's Magazine*, May, 1831.)

The success of *Rienzi* in America, and the previous re-publication in that country of a small volume of the *Narrative Poems on the Female Character*, had brought Miss Mitford's name prominently before the American people, and towards the end of 1830 she was gratified by the receipt of a long letter of congratulation from Miss Catharine Maria Sedgwick,[1] an American author of some repute in her day, who had, that year, published a novel entitled *Hope Leslie*. The letter mentioned the despatch of an author's copy of one of the writer's books and asked for particulars of the village and home-life of Miss Mitford, whose volumes on *Our Village* were being read with avidity across the Atlantic. It drew a long and characteristic reply.

"I rejoice," wrote Miss Mitford, "to find that your book is not merely reprinted but published in England, and will contribute, together with the splendid novels of Mr. Cooper, to make the literature and manners of a country so nearly connected with us in language and ways of thinking, known and valued here. I think that every day contributes to that great end. Cooper is certainly, next to Scott, the most popular novel writer of the age. Washington Irving enjoys a high and fast reputation; the eloquence of Dr. Channing, if less widely, is perhaps more deeply felt; and a lady, whom I need not name, takes

[1] She was related to the President, General Jackson.

her place amongst these great men, as Miss Edgeworth does among our Scotts and Chalmerses. I have contributed, or rather, am about to contribute, my mite to this most desirable interchange of mind with mind, having selected and edited three volumes of tales, taken from the great mass of your periodical literature, and called *Stories of American Life by American Authors*. They are not yet published, but have been printed some time; and I shall desire Mr. Colburn to send you a copy, to which, indeed, you have every way a right, since I owe to you some of the best stories in the collection." Then followed a short description of the events which led up to the removal from Bertram House to the cottage at Three Mile Cross. "There was, however, no loss of character amongst our other losses; and it is to the credit of human nature to say, that our change of circumstances has been attended with no other change amongst our neighbours and friends than that of increased attentions and kindness. Indeed I can never be sufficiently thankful for the very great goodness which I have experienced all through life, from almost every one with whom I have been connected. My dear mother I had the misfortune to lose last winter. My dear father still lives, a beautiful and cheerful old man, whom I should of all things like you to know, and if ever you do come to our little England, you must come and see us. We should never forgive you if you did

not. Our family losses made me an authoress . . . and I should have abstained from all literary offence for the future had not poverty driven me against my will to writing tragic verse and comic prose ; thrice happy to have been able, by so doing, to be of some use to my dear family."

In response to the invitation contained in this letter Miss Sedgwick did call at the cottage when, some years later, she paid a visit to this country. It was a visit ostensibly undertaken to see the sights and meet the lions—particularly the literary lions. The record of the trip was embodied in two small volumes published in 1841 by Moxon, in London, and entitled *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home.* Miss Sedgwick possessed a telling style, picturesque to a degree, and there can be no shadow of doubt that her "kindred at home" were delighted to have her spicy epistles, but they shocked Miss Mitford. "If you have a mind," the latter wrote to a friend, "to read the coarsest Americanism ever put forth, read the *Literary Gazette* of this last week. I remember, my dear love, how much and how justly you were shocked at Miss Sedgwick's way of speaking of poor Miss Landon's death ; but when you remember that her brother and nephew had spent twice ten days at our poor cottage—that she had been received as their kinswoman, and therefore as a friend, you may judge how unexpected this coarse detail has been. The *Athenæum* will give you no notion of the

original passage nor the book itself—for John Kenyon, meeting with it at Moxon's, cancelled the passage—but too late for the journals, except the *Athenæum*. Of course its chief annoyance to me is the finding the aunt of a dear friend so excessively vulgar. Do get the *Literary Gazette* —for really it must be seen to be believed."

We quote the extract from the *Literary Gazette* of July 10, 1841.

" Our coachman (who, after telling him we were Americans, had complimented us on our speaking English, 'and very good English, too') professed an acquaintance of some twenty years standing with Miss M., and assured us that she was one of the 'cleverest women in England,' and 'the Doctor' (her father) 'an 'earty old boy.' And when he reined his horses up to her door, and she appeared to receive us, he said, 'Now you would not take that little body there for the great author, would you?' and certainly we should have taken her for nothing but a kindly gentlewoman, who had never gone beyond the narrow sphere of the most refined social life. . . . Miss M. is truly 'a little body,' and dressed a little quaintly, and as unlike as possible to the faces we have seen of her in the magazines, which all have a broad humour, bordering on coarseness. She has a pale grey, soul-lit eye, and hair as white as snow; a wintry sign that has come prematurely upon her, as like signs come upon us, while the year is yet fresh and undecayed. Her

voice has a sweet, low tone, and her manner a naturalness, frankness, and affectionateness, that we have been so long familiar with in their other modes of manifestation, that it would have been indeed a disappointment not to have found them. . . . The garden is filled, matted with flowering shrubs and vines; the trees are wreathed with honeysuckles and roses. Oh! that I could give some of my countrywomen a vision of this little paradise of flowers, that they might learn how taste and industry and an earnest love and study of the art of garden-culture, might triumph over small space and small means. In this very humble home she receives on equal terms the best in the land. Her literary reputation might have gained for her this elevation, but she started on vantage-ground, being allied by blood to the Duke of Bedford's family."

Speaking for ourselves, we are inclined to disagree with Miss Mitford's strictures. The article is breezy, certainly, and short of the reference to the 'earty old boy and to herself as "the little body," we confess to finding it little short of a very kindly tribute. As to the concluding sentence of the article, that was, perhaps, a case of "drawing the long bow," but then both Miss Mitford and her mother frequently alluded to the distant connection of the latter with the Bedford's, and the fact must have been mentioned by Miss Mitford in her visitor's hearing.

As a companion to the *Stories of American*

Life, Whittaker suggested a series of similar stories for children, and it was upon this project that Miss Mitford worked at the end of 1830 and into 1831. The work was to comprise six volumes —three for children over ten years of age and three for those of ten and under, and the publication was completed by the year 1832. Then, as Dr. Mitford's exactions were still great and his purse had to be kept well filled, his daughter's mind turned once more to the Drama and to the play of *Charles the First*, which lay neglected for want of official sanction. The Duke of Devonshire having, by this time, succeeded the Duke of Montrose as Lord Chamberlain, Miss Mitford made one more attempt to secure a licence for the banned play. A letter—a veritable model of courtesy and diplomacy—was despatched to His Grace with a copy of the work in question :—

"My Lord Duke,—

"The spirit of liberality and justice to dramatic authors by which your Grace's exercise of the functions of Lord High Chamberlain has been distinguished, forms the only excuse for the liberty taken in sending my tragedy of *Charles the First* direct to yourself, instead of transmitting it, in the usual mode, from the theatre to Mr. Colman. To send it to that gentleman, indeed, would be worse than useless, the play having been written at the time of the Duke of Montrose, and a licence having been refused to it on account

of the title and the subject, which Mr. Colman declared to be inadmissible on the stage. That this is not the general opinion may be inferred from the subject's having been repeatedly pointed out by different critics as one of the most dramatic points of English history, and especially recommended to me both by managers and actors. That such could not always have been the feeling of those in power is proved by the fact that there is actually a tragedy, on the very same subject and bearing the very same title, written some sixty or seventy years since by Havard the player, in which John Kemble, at one time, performed the principal character, and which might be represented any night, at any other theatre, without the necessity of a licence or the possibility of an objection. It is the existence of this piece which makes the prohibition of mine seem doubly hard, and emboldens me to appeal to your Grace's kindness against the rigorous decree of your predecessor. . . . I am not aware that there is in the whole piece one line which could be construed into bearing the remotest analogy to present circumstances, or that could cause scandal or offence to the most loyal. If I had been foolish or wicked enough to have written such things, the reign of William the Fourth and the administration of Earl Grey would hardly be the time to produce them."

To this the Duke replied that he could not—consistently with his established rule not to re-

verse the decisions of his predecessor—license the play, and so the matter was dropped for a time.

Meanwhile active preparations were in progress for the fifth and last volume of *Our Village*, and, during the year, there was a mild rehearsal at the cottage of a Scena, entitled *Mary Queen of Scots' Farewell to France*, which Miss Mitford had composed at the instigation of a Reading young man named Charles Parker, who had set the Scena to music—"a sweet and charming lad in mind and temper, a Master of the Royal Musical Academy of London, not yet twenty-one," was Miss Mitford's description of him.

This composition was declared, so the author said, to be "as fine as anything in English music," and those who were privileged to hear the village rehearsal were charmed with it, although they heard it to disadvantage, "for it makes fifty pages of music, and requires the united bands of Drury Lane and the Royal Musical Academy and above fifty chorus-women. The first five lines (an almost literal translation of Mary's own verses,

'Adieu! plaisant pays de France'),

are the air—then the blank verse in exquisite recitative—then a magnificent chorus—then the song again—and then a chorus fading into the distance. No woman in England except Mrs. Wood can sing it; so that whether it will be performed in public is doubtful; but it is some-

thing to have furnished the thread on which such pearls are strung." Unfortunately the composition never did obtain a hearing, so far as we can discover. Following this, and late in the year 1831, with a view to helping forward the fortunes of Mr. Parker, Miss Mitford became again "immersed in music." "I am writing an opera for and with Charles Parker; and you would really be diverted to find how learned I am become on the subject of choruses and double choruses and trios and septets. Very fine music carries me away more than anything—but then it must be *very* fine. Our opera will be most splendid—a real opera—all singing and recitative—blank verse of course, and rhyme for the airs, with plenty of magic—an Eastern fairy tale." This was *Sadak and Kalasrade*, of which an unkind but truthful critic wrote: "It was only once performed. Wretchedly played and sung as it was, it hardly deserved a better fate. The music, by a now forgotten pupil of our Academy of Music, was heavy and valueless, and the dramatist, though graceful and fresh as a lyrist, had not the instinct, or had not mastered the secret of writing for music." This, of course, meant so much wasted time and energy at a period when both were valuable and needed conserving as much as possible.

It was unfortunate that the opera proved such a failure, for on its success the Mitfords were relying for the replenishment of their exchequer.

"Shall we be able to go on if the Opera is delayed till February?" wrote Miss Mitford in September, 1832, to her father, then staying at the *Sussex Hotel* in Bouverie Street. She had been busy during the spring and summer in making up lost time on the preparation of the last volume of *Our Village*. It was published in the autumn, but as its author made no mention of the matter in her letter to her father, we presume that an advance payment on account had been received and used. In the same letter she alludes to a notice of objection to the Doctor's vote, "not on account of the vote, but for fear it should bring on that abominable question of the qualification for the magistracy. Ask our dear Mr. Talfourd whether the two fields, forty shilling freehold, will be enough, without bringing out the other affair. In short, it worries me exceedingly; and if there were any danger in it one way or other it would be best to keep out of the way and lose the vote, rather than do anything that could implicate the other and far more important matter." In so far as the magistracy was concerned it was astonishing that the matter had never been questioned.

With her father in London—the seat of his temptations—spending her hard-earned income, she grew low-spirited and ill. Her complaint, she explained in a letter to William Harness, was one brought on by anxiety, fatigue or worry, and she told him how she hesitated consulting

a physician, knowing full well that his prescription would be "not to write." The bread had to be earned and the means secured which would give her father plenty wherewith to enjoy himself. Added to this were the "levees"—as she called them—which she was forced to endure all day long by reason of the folk who came from far and near to call upon her. "Every idle person who comes within twenty miles gets a letter of introduction, or an introduction in the shape of an acquaintance, and comes to see my geraniums or myself—Heaven knows which! I have had seven carriages at once at the door of our little cottage—and this is terrible when one is not well."

While the Doctor was still in London an offer came from one of Miss Mitford's cousins—a Mrs. Raggett—suggesting that she should give up authorship altogether and live with her and her husband, the scheme being that Miss Mitford should act as reader and secretary to Mr. Raggett, who was nearly blind, and be a companion to his wife. "The offer had great temptation," she told William Harness, "and I have no doubt we should have been happy together, but it is clear my father's comfort would have been destroyed by such an arrangement; the sacrifice of his old habits—his old friends—the blameless self-importance which results from his station as Chairman of the Reading Bench—and his really influential position in this county, where we are much respected in spite of our poverty, would

have been far too much to ask or to permit. I refused it therefore at once."

To her old friend, Sir William Elford—not often written to in these driving days—she wrote : " I must be obliged to get out another book this spring, although how I shall be able to write it God only knows. I am glad you like my last volume ; I myself hate all my own doings, and consider the being forced to this drudgery as the greatest misery that life can afford. But it is my wretched fate and must be undergone —so long, at least, as my father is spared to me. If I should have the misfortune to lose him, I shall go quietly to the workhouse, and never write another line—a far preferable destiny."

CHAPTER XXIII

"MY OLDEST AND KINDEST FRIEND."

"NATURE has given us two ears, but only one mouth—why do not we take the hint?" was a sentence which Macready wrote in his Diary when suffering the consequences of some ill-advised, hasty utterance. If only Miss Mitford, with her impulsiveness, had seen this sentence and could have realized how wise was the advice contained in it, she would have been a happier woman in many respects. Too often her eagerness to champion the cause of one of her friends led her to embitter and estrange another. Among her neighbours was a family of the name of Merry, and one day, while Talfourd was on a visit to the Mitford Cottage, Mr. Merry called and in some way affronted the other. This vexed the hostess considerably at the time, and was referred to later, when she and the Merrys met at an afternoon function at Bearwood, the residence of Mr. Walter, of the *Times*. There was a heated argument, and Miss Mitford took up a resentful attitude, "certainly with too much violence," as she afterwards ex-

plained. The occasion was ill-chosen for such an altercation, and Mr. Merry was deeply offended. Repenting at leisure, Miss Mitford wrote him an apology, which he would not accept. For six weeks he nursed his grievance, spreading the tale of Miss Mitford's offence among mutual friends. Realizing at last how deeply she had offended, Miss Mitford sent her old friend the following letter, which we quote as an instance of her whole-hearted contrition.

"I cannot suffer you to leave our neighbourhood for weeks, perhaps for months, without making one more effort to soften a displeasure too justly excited—without once more acknowledging my fault, and entreating your forgiveness. Do not again repulse me—pray do not! Life is too short, too full of calamity, for an alienation indefinitely prolonged—a pardon so long suspended. I know you better, perhaps, than you know yourself, and am sure that, were I at this moment suffering under any great affliction, you would be the first—ay, the very first—to soothe and to succour me. If my father (which may God in his mercy avert!) were dead; if I myself were on a sick bed, or in prison, or in a workhouse (and you well know that this is the destiny to which I always look forward), then you would come to me—I am sure of it. You would be as ready to fly to my assistance then as the angel of peace and mercy at your side" —[a tender allusion to Mrs. Merry, who was deeply

grieved at the estrangement].—"But do not wait for that moment; do not, for an error which has been sincerely and severely repented, deprive a melancholy and a most anxious existence of one of its few consolations. Lonely and desolate as I am—with no one belonging to me in the world but my dear father—poor in every sense, earning with pain and difficulty a livelihood which every day makes more precarious, I cannot afford the loss of your sympathy. I say this without fear of misconstruction. You will understand that what I regret is the friendship, and intimacy, the every-day intercourse of mind and of heart, on which even you yourself—so much more happily placed—did yet set some value. You did like me once; try me again. You will find me—at least I hope so—all the better for the rigorous discipline which my mind has lately undergone, the salutary and unwonted course of self-examination and self-abasement.

"At all events, do not go without a few words of peace and of kindness. I send you the last flowers of my garden. Your flower seems to have continued in blossom on purpose to assist in the work of reconciliation. Do not scorn its sweet breath, or resist its mute pleadings, but give me in exchange one bunch of the laurustinus for which I used to ask you last winter, and let it be a token of the full and perfect reconciliation for which I am a suppliant; and then I shall

cherish it—oh, I cannot tell you how much! Once again, forgive me—and farewell."

It is pleasant to record that this touching appeal had, as of course it would, the desired effect, and the old happy relationship was renewed.

The year was 1833 and, like many a previous one, it was full of pecuniary worries and embarrassments. Dr. Mitford was again giving trouble, seeking to augment his income by some doubtful investment for which he had, as usual, the tip of some unscrupulous schemer, to whose class he fell an easy prey. The matter fortunately came to Miss Mitford's knowledge, and she wrote off in great haste to William Harness "to caution you in case you should receive any authority, from any quarter, to sell out our money in the Funds, not to do so without communicating with me. I have no doubt of my father's integrity, but I think him likely to be imposed on."

This was a more serious matter than it at first appears. The money in the Funds was left by Dr. Russell for his daughter and her offspring and could not therefore be touched without authority from Miss Mitford, who was her mother's sole heir. How then did Dr. Mitford propose to obtain its use? There is only one answer and it is one which involves the integrity which Miss Mitford did not question. Harness's reply was plain and to the point. "Depend upon it the money shall never be touched with *my* consent. It was consideration for your future

welfare which prevented my father's consenting to its being sold out some years ago, when you had been persuaded, and wished to persuade him, to your own utter ruin." [This was during the stressful time at Bertram House when, with the consent of her mother, Miss Mitford wrote to Dr. Harness imploring him to sell out and give her father the use of the money.] "That £3,000 I consider as the sheet-anchor of your independence, if age should ever render literature irksome to you, or infirmity incapacitate you for exertion; and, *while your father lives*, it shall never stir from its present post in the Funds. After he has ceased (as all fathers must cease) to live, my first object will be to consult with you and my most intelligent money-managing friends, and discover the mode of making the stock most profitable to your comfort, either by annuity or any other mode that may be thought most advisable. Till then—*from whatever quarter the proposition may come*—I have but one black, blank, unqualified *No* for my answer. I do not doubt Dr. Mitford's integrity, but I have not the slightest confidence in his prudence; and I am fully satisfied that if these three thousand and odd hundreds of pounds were placed at his disposal *to-day*, they would fly the way so many other thousands have gone before them, *to-morrow*. Excuse me saying this; but I cannot help it."

This letter stands to the lasting credit of its

writer and affords ample proof of his steadfast and unflinching devotion to his trust, failing which the tragedy of Miss Mitford's life would have been deeper than it was. He alone had the power of drawing out the best that was in Miss Mitford, in getting her to express the moral and spiritual side of her nature. Art, literature, the Drama she could talk and write upon to other people, but it was to William Harness that she would pour out her convictions on the deeper things of life. He sent her a book of his sermons, and although it reached her at midnight (having been conveyed from her friend by Dr. Milman to her father, whom he met at a dinner-party), she sat far into the night, reading and studying it, and inditing a reply at three o'clock in the morning while the mood was hot upon her.

"I have read it through—the second part twice through. That second sermon would have done honour to Shakespeare, and I half expected to find you quoting him. There would be a tacit hypocricy, a moral cowardice, if I were to stop here, and not to confess, what I think you must suspect, although by no chance do I ever talk about it—that I do not, or rather cannot, believe all that the Church requires. I humbly hope that it is not necessary to do so, and that a devout sense of the mercy of God, and an endeavour, however imperfectly and feebly, to obey the great precepts of justice and kindness, may be accepted in lieu of that entire faith which, in

me, *will not* be commanded. You will not suspect me of thoughtlessness in this matter; neither, I trust, does it spring from intellectual pride. Few persons have a deeper sense of their own weakness; few, indeed, can have so much weakness of character to deplore and to strive against. Do not answer this part of my letter. It has cost me a strong effort to say this to you; but it would have been a concealment amounting to a falsity if I had not, and falsehood must be wrong. Do not notice it; a correspondence of controversy could only end in alienation, and I could not afford to lose my oldest and kindest friend—to break up the close intimacy in which I am so happy and of which I am so proud." This was in 1829. In the Spring of 1834 her old friend sent another of his printed sermons, which again she read and studied and which drew from her some pronouncements on Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Church and on questions of Social Reform which cannot but be read with interest to-day.

"It is a very able and conciliatory plea for the Church. My opinion (if an insignificant woman may presume to give one) is, that certain reforms ought to be; that very gross cases of pluralities should be abolished (it is too sweeping, I think, to say *all* pluralities); that some few of the clergy are too rich, and that a great many are too poor; but (although not holding all her doctrines) I heartily agree with you that,

as an establishment, the Church ought to remain; for, to say nothing of the frightful precedent of sweeping away property, a precedent which would not stop there, the country would be over-run with fanatics, and, in the rural districts especially, a clergyman (provided he be not a magistrate) is generally, in *worldly*, as well as spiritual matters, a great comfort to the poor. But our wise legislators never think of the rural districts—*never*. They legislate against gin-shops, which are the evil of great towns, and encourage beer-shops, which are the pest of the country, the cause of half the poverty and three-fourths of the demoralization. But the Church must be (as many of her members *are*) wisely tolerant; bishops must not wage war with theatres, nor rectors with a Sunday evening game of cricket. If they take up the arms of the Puritans, the Puritans will beat them."

The reference in this letter to rectors and Sunday cricket is most interesting in view of the fact that only a few miles away, in the village of Eversley, there had just arrived a new curate who, as time went on, became the rector; and who, among other things, shocked some of his clerical brethren by actually encouraging manly sports, such as cricket and quoits, on the village green in the intervals between the Sunday services. His name was Charles Kingsley and he was destined to be numbered among the very dear friends of Miss Mitford in her declining days.

The refusal—the just refusal—of William Harness to entertain Dr. Mitford's idea regarding money matters, somewhat upset the latter's calculations, besides causing him to be more importunate in his demands on his daughter. There were, of course, certain sums coming in regularly from the various magazines, but these were not sufficient, and so both father and daughter decided to take a bold risk and endeavour to produce the prohibited play of *Charles the First* at some theatre where the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain did not operate.

Dr. Mitford took the manuscript with him to London in the May of 1834, where, by the kindness of Mr. T. J. Serle—a noted playwright and actor—he was introduced to Mr. Abbott, who, having left Covent Garden Theatre and become Manager of the Victoria Theatre in the Waterloo Road, was a likely person to take up the project. Mr. Abbott immediately accepted the play and was extremely liberal in his terms—£200 to be paid down and a fourth share of the profits if the play ran for a certain number of nights. The negotiations were somewhat prolonged, but by the end of June the whole matter had been arranged and Miss Mitford went to town to superintend the rehearsals. The play was produced in July, with Mr. Cathcart in the cast and with the prologue both written and spoken by Mr. Serle. It was a great success, despite the drawbacks attendant on its production in a minor theatre

on the Surrey side of the Thames. Writing to her friend Miss Jephson, the delighted author said:—"The papers will of course have told you that both I and my actor have been successful . . . the thing is admirably got up, the theatre beautiful, and Cathcart's acting refined, intellectual, powerful and commanding beyond anything I ever witnessed. . . . They make a real queen of me, and would certainly demolish my humility, if I were happy enough to be humble, though I feel that over-praise, over-estimation, is a far more humbling thing—a thing that sends you back on your own mind to ask, 'Have I deserved this?' than anything else that can be. For the first ten days I spent on an average from four to six hours every morning in the Victoria Theatre, at hard scolding, for the play has been entirely got up by me; then I dined out amongst twenty or thirty eminent strangers every evening. Since that I have been to operas and to pictures, and held a sort of drawing-room every morning; so that I am so worn out, as to have, for three days out of the last four, fainted dead away between four and five o'clock, a fine-lady trick which I never played before, and which teaches me I must return, as soon as I can, into the country, to write another play and run again the same round of fatigue, excitement and pleasure. After all, my primary object is, and has been, to establish Mr. Cathcart."

Mary Russell Mitford.
(From a drawing by F. R. Say, 1837.)

Although the Duke of Devonshire could not agree to licence the play, he was not averse to accepting its Dedication to himself, acknowledging it in a very gracious note to the author. Thus, set on their feet once more, the little household pursued a normal course of existence. The Doctor went to London and his daughter plodded, exhausted and overdone, at her new book, which was to be called *Belford Regis* and be descriptive of life and character in a country town—Belford Regis being, of course, none other than the adjacent town of Reading.

It was a project originally undertaken by its author for no other purpose than to try her hand at delineating the scenery and characteristics of a town in the same way that she had treated the country in *Our Village*. The original scheme was for one volume, but the thing grew and the characters afforded such scope to the writer that, by the time it was published, it had extended to three volumes.

While Dr. Mitford was in town—he went up in the early part of 1835—he opened up negotiations on the subject with Richard Bentley, the publisher, and secured very good terms, with the result that Bentley published *Belford Regis: or Sketches of a Country Town*, late in the same year. Charming and valuable as the book may be for its picture of life in the Reading of that day, it cannot compare in the slightest degree with the similar work which preceded it.

It is slipshod as to style and is full of repetitions, bearing all too plainly the marks of hurried compilation and the harassed, overworked mind of its author. Miss Mitford, recognized these faults, but attributed them to another cause, viz., "its having been sent up at different times; having been first intended to appear in one volume, then in two, and now in three volumes."

It had a certain success; that was inevitable with a book from Miss Mitford's pen now that her reputation had been established; but the success was not maintained, and now *Belford Regis* is looked upon as a literary curiosity by students and with affection by all who claim a more than passing interest in the town which it describes. The critics of the day were divided in their opinions; some preferred it to *Our Village*, but most found fault with it in that it pictured life as too bright and sunny. The author's own estimate was conveyed in a letter to Miss Jephson.

"In my opinion it is overloaded with civil notes, and too full of carelessnesses and trifling repetitions. . . . Nevertheless, I myself prefer it to my other prose works, both as bolder and more various and deeper in sentiment, and as containing one character (a sort of embodiment of the strong sense and right feeling which I believe to be common in the middling classes, emphatically *the people*) which appears and reappears in several of the stories, giving comfortable proof of the power to carry on a strongly distinguished

character through three volumes which, if I do not comply (as I suppose I must) with Mr. Bentley's desire for a novel, will be very valuable."

This project of a novel was one which Miss Mitford thought upon as a sort of nightmare. Longmans had proposed it years before but had been met with a refusal, and now Bentley was renewing the attack, though he did not succeed.

Altogether the year was one which should have been regarded as prosperous. It saw the issue of the fourteenth edition of the first volume of *Our Village* and the issue of a two-volume edition (five vols. in two), illustrated with woodcuts by George Baxter, who visited Three Mile Cross early in the year to take sketches under the author's supervision. It also saw the production of the opera *Sadak and Kalasrade* at the Lyceum, but this can hardly be accounted a success as its performance was restricted to one night.

The publication of *Belford Regis* naturally inspired the writing of many congratulatory letters to its author and brought shoals of visitors to the little cottage to see the author and her flowers—the latter she had described in great detail in the work. Among the visitors were William and Mary Howitt, both of whom went away charmed with all they had seen. Mary Howitt told Miss Mitford that her study of the development of intellect in the heroine of "The Dissenting Minister," might pass for the history of her own mind, and that the author must

have lived much amongst rigid Dissenters to give so exact a picture of the goings-on in the interior of their families.

William Howitt paid his tribute in a delightful account of his visit which appeared in the *Athenæum* of August of that same year. It was entitled, *A Visit to our Village*, and, although Miss Mitford thought the praise was overdone, she yet hoped her old friend, Sir William Elford, would read it :—" It is at once so pretty and so kind ; the praise does not describe me as I am, because I fall far short of the picture ; but it is just how I should wish to be—and how very seldom does that happen ! "

And, in addition to all this, the September brought a commission from the editors of *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal.* " It is one of the signs of the times, that a periodical selling for three-halfpence should engage so high-priced a writer as myself ; but they have a circulation of 200,000 or 300,000." This was Miss Mitford's passing comment on the transaction, but it was to be of far more lasting importance than she anticipated, resulting as it did in a close friendship with William Chambers and in a scheme of collaboration in which she took a prominent part.

CHAPTER XXIV

VARIOUS FRIENDSHIPS

WITH the publication of *Belford Regis* there came slight periods of rest—rest, that is, from the strenuous and wearing labour of writing against time in the fulfilment of contracts. During these temporary lulls in output Miss Mitford wandered about in her small garden, watching and tending her flowers as would a mother her children. Her especial delight was in the raising of seedlings, always a source of keen pleasure to an enthusiastic gardener. To print a catalogue of all her flowers would fill a large chapter, they were so many and varied, for scarcely a letter went to any of her flower-loving friends but it contained some request for a slip of this, or a cutting from that plant, or else a word of thanks for a floral gift just received. The popularity of the author of *Our Village* was so universal and extended to so many classes of the community that, to quote one evidence alone, it was no rare thing to find a new rose or a new dahlia figuring in contemporary florists' lists as the " Miss Mitford " or the " Our

Village," a pretty proof, as the author herself said, " of the way in which gardeners estimate my love of flowers, that they are constantly calling plants after me, and sending me one of the first cuttings as presents. There is a dahlia now selling at ten guineas a root under my name ; I have not seen the flower, but have just had one sent me (a cutting) which will of course blow in the autumn." A delightful fancy, this, and one which obtains to this day, as witness any of the modern horticulturists' lists.

It was to the culture of geraniums, however, that she principally devoted herself, " and," said she, " it is lucky that I do, since they are comparatively easy to rear and manage, and do not lay one under any tremendous obligation to receive, for I never buy any." She was writing to her friend, Miss Emily Jephson, in Ireland, with whom she was in fairly regular correspondence, although Miss Jephson had to share with Sir William Elford the long periods of silence which betokened their mutual friend's slavery with the pen at the little cottage. Referring to these beloved geraniums, Miss Mitford wrote :— " All my varieties (amounting to at least three hundred different sorts) have been either presents, or exchanges, or my own seedlings—chiefly exchanges ; for when once one has a good collection, that becomes an easy mode of enlarging it ; and it is one pleasant to all parties, for it is a very great pleasure to have a flower in a friend's

A portrait of Miss Mitford in 1837.
(From Chorley's *Authors of England.*)

garden. You, my own Emily, gave me my first plants of the potentilla, and very often as I look at them, I think of you." One especially fine seedling geranium she named the "Ion," a floral tribute to Serjeant Talfourd's play, upon which he was then working.

What a wonderful garden it was!—a veritable garden of friendship wherein, as the quaint little figure in her calico sun-bonnet pottered about, picking off dead leaves and stained petals, she actually communed with her friends whose representatives they were. This was a pleasure her father could not take from her, indeed, to his credit be it recorded, it was a pleasure in which he shared.

Talfourd's play, of which mention was made just now, was a work upon which he devoted odd moments of leisure snatched from his busy life of professional duties as one of the leading men of his day at the Bar. Pope's lines: "I left no calling for this idle trade, no duty broke," is the fitting motto with which he headed his Preface when the play was published in book form, for, as he said, it was composed for the most part on journeys while on Circuit, and afterwards committed to paper, a process of composition which, it may be readily conceived, extended over a lengthy period. When published it was dedicated to his old schoolmaster, the Rev. Richard Valpy, D.D., as "a slender token of gratitude for benefits which cannot be ex-

pressed in words," and in the course of the Preface there were felicitous references to " the delightful artist," Mr. Macready, and to the " power and beauty " of, among others, the play of *Rienzi*."

In Macready's Diary, under date March 15, 1835, is the entry :—" Forster told me of Talfourd having completed a tragedy called *Ion*. What an extraordinary, what an indefatigable man ! " He was greatly pleased by the kind mention of himself in the Preface, and on May 7 made this significant entry in his Diary :—" Read Talfourd's tragedy of *Ion* ; pleased with the opening scenes and, as I proceeded, arrested and held by the interest of the story and the characters, as well as by the very beautiful thoughts, and the very noble ones, with which the play is interspersed. How delightful to read his dedication to his master and benefactor, Dr. Valpy, and the gentle outpourings of his affectionate heart towards his friends and associates ; if one did not love, one would envy such a use of one's abilities."

The play was produced on May 26, 1836, and was a great success, Macready admitting that he had done better in the performance than he had been able to attain for some time. May 26 was, curiously enough, Talfourd's birthday, and Miss Mitford was among the great host of friends, invited to do honour to the play and its writer. She went to town some days previous to the event and was the guest of the Talfourds at their house at 56, Russell Square. Her letters home

to her father, whom she had left there, are full of the delights of her visit—the dinners and the diners, among whom were the poets Wordsworth, Rogers and Robert Browning (the last then but a young and comparatively unknown man), Stanfield the artist, Landor, Lucas and William Harness.

After the performance the principal actors repaired to Talfourd's house, there to partake of a sumptuous repast to which over fifty people—leading lights in Art, Letters and the Sciences—sat down. It was a great function, marked by many complimentary speeches, as the occasion demanded. Macready, of course, shared the honours with Talfourd, and, in a moment of exaltation, turned to Miss Mitford and asked her whether the present occasion did not stimulate her to write a play. It was an ill-chosen remark, for she was then at the very height of popularity as the author of the successful *Rienzi*, but she quickly replied, "Will you act it?" Macready did not answer, and Harness, who was close by, chaffingly remarked to Miss Mitford, "Aye, hold him to that." "When I heard that *that* was Harness, the man who, I believe, inflicted such a deep and assassin-like wound upon me—through *Blackwood's Magazine*—I could not repress the expression of indignant contempt which found its way to my face, and overgloomed the happy feeling that had before been there." This was Macready's written comment

on the incident, but how he had misjudged Harness throughout this unpleasant affair has been dealt with by us in a previous chapter.

Miss Mitford knew nothing of the bitterness which her innocent reply had engendered and fully enjoyed the round of festivities to which she was invited. On the day following the first performance of *Ion*, her friend Mr. Kenyon called to take her to see the giraffes—they were then being exhibited for the first time in this country at the Zoological Gardens—and on the way suggested they should call at Gloucester Place for a young friend of his, "a sweet young woman—a Miss Barrett—who reads Greek as I do French, and has published some translations from Æschylus and some most striking poems. She is a delightful young creature; shy, and timid and modest. Nothing but her desire to see me got her out at all, but now she is coming to us to-morrow night also."

This occasion marks an important event in Miss Mitford's life—her introduction to Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, which from that moment grew and strengthened, a fragrant friendship which lasted through life, much prized by both.

"She is so sweet and gentle," wrote Miss Mitford to her father, "and so pretty, that one looks at her as if she were some bright flower; and she says it is like a dream that she should be talking to me, whose works she knows by heart."

Writing next year to her friend Mrs. Martin,

Miss Barrett said of her literary friend: "She stands higher as the authoress of *Our Village* than of *Rienzi*, and writes prose better than poetry, and transcends rather in Dutch minuteness and higher finishing than in Italian ideality and passion."

Truth to tell, this visit to London was having the effect of slightly exalting our gentle village author; she found herself the very centre of attraction, every one paying her homage. Talfourd's house was besieged by callers—not on Talfourd—but on his guest. Wordsworth was calling every day, chanting the praises of *Rienzi* and the abilities of its author; the Duke of Devonshire brought her "a splendid nosegay of lilies of the valley—a thousand flowers without leaves," and begged her never to come again to London without informing him and giving him the opportunity of enjoying a similar pleasure. Mr. and Mrs. Talfourd grew indignant; they had not bargained for this when they invited their quaintly-clad, old-fashioned friend from Three Mile Cross to witness the triumph of Talfourd and *Ion!* Talfourd was jealous, positively jealous, and openly showed it by a marked coolness towards his old friend, a coolness which she pretended not to notice, although it hurt her very much. "They are much displeased with Miss Mitford," wrote Macready of his friends the Talfourds. "She seems to be showing herself *well up*." "William Harness says he

never saw any one received with such a mixture of enthusiasm and respect as I have been—not even Madame de Staël. Wordsworth, dear old man! aids it by his warm and approving kindness"—was Miss Mitford's report to her father.

It was arranged that she should stay in London in order to witness the second performance of *Ion*, fixed for June 1, but on the morning preceding this, while sitting at breakfast, Talfourd bitterly complained of some depreciating comments on his play which he had just read in one of the morning papers. To soothe him Miss Mitford suggested that he need not take such things too seriously, adding that she thought the critics had been far more favourable to his play than to her own; at which he flamed out: "Your *Rienzi*, indeed; I dare say not—you forget the difference!" and behaved with such scorn and anger that his guest was shocked, packed up her boxes and fled to William Harness. "We have had no quarrel"—was the report home—"no coolness on *my* part. I behaved at first with the warmest and truest sympathy until it was chilled by his bitter scorn; and since, thank Heaven! I have never lost my self-command—never ceased to behave to him with the most perfect politeness. He must change very much indeed before the old feeling will come back to me."

It was through Miss Mitford that William Harness was first introduced to Talfourd, although, judging by certain circumstances which arose

Mary Russell Mitford.

(From a painting by John Lucas, in the National Portrait Gallery.)

from time to time, we hold the opinion that William Harness, who demanded more from his friends than did Miss Mitford, never really appreciated the acquaintance. Harness was for ever questioning the other's motives, and more than once hinted his suspicions to Miss Mitford who at once defended the other—as was her wont. Talfourd's jealousy was, let us say, pardonable, but when it turned to venom, as it did, we dare not condone. Meeting Macready one evening of the following November, the conversation turned on Miss Mitford and a new play she was projecting and which Mr. Forrest,[1] a rival to Macready, was to produce. "I have no faith in her power of writing a play, and to that opinion Talfourd subscribed to-night—concurring in all I thought of her falsehood and baseness!" These are Macready's own words, but fortunately Miss Mitford died without knowledge of them, otherwise her faith in her old idol would have been rudely shattered. Talfourd, of whom she had ever spoken kindly; whose career she had watched, glorying in his successes; who had himself praised her talent for the Drama and urged her to forsake all else for it, and now concurred in another's disparaging references to that same talent—"concurring in all I thought of her falsehood and baseness!"

[1] He was alleged to have instigated the riotous demonstration against Macready in Boston, U.S.A., twelve years later.

This London visit closed with a dinner-party at Lord and Lady Dacre's—Lady Dacre was a relative of the Ogles and therefore distantly connected with the Mitfords. "It is a small house, with a round table that only holds eight," wrote Miss Mitford, and, as she proceeded to relate that fifty people assembled, and offers no further explanation, we wonder how they were accommodated. The company included Edwin Landseer, "who invited himself to come and paint Dash"—the favourite spaniel—"Pray tell Dash."

Mr. Kenyon was also there—he had just brought about the introduction to Miss Barrett, and was consequently in high esteem—of whom Miss Mitford told her friend Harness that he had written a fine poem, "Upper Austria," to be found in that year's *Keepsake*, as a test of his sanity. "From feelings of giddiness, he feared his head was attacked. He composed these verses (*not writing them* until the poem of four hundred or five hundred lines was complete) as a test. It turned out that the stomach was deranged, and he was set to rights in no time."

A wonderful fortnight this, with its introductions to all the notables—"Jane Porter, Joanna Baillie, and I know not how many other females of eminence, to say nothing of all the artists, poets, prosers, talkers and actors of the day."

"And now I am come home to work hard, if the people will let me; for the swarms of

visitors, and the countless packets of notes and letters which I receive surpass belief."

With the introduction to Miss Barrett a new correspondent was added to the already large list with whom Miss Mitford kept in touch, and from the middle of the year 1836 the letters between the two friends were frequent and voluminous. The early ones from Three Mile Cross display an amusing motherliness on the part of their writer, containing frequent references to the necessity of cultivating style and clearness of expression, all of which Miss Barrett took in good part and promised to bear in mind. But in this matter of letter-writing Miss Mitford was really expending herself too much—it was a weakness which she could never overcome—and the consequence was that she either neglected her work or performed it when the household was asleep. Then, still further obstacles to a steady output arrived in the person of the painter Lucas, who wanted to paint another portrait of his friend, and was only put off by being allowed to paint the Doctor, the sittings for which were given at Bertram House, then in the occupation of Captain Gore, a genial friend of the Mitfords. The portrait was a great success, every one praising it. "It is as like as the looking-glass," wrote the delighted daughter to Miss Jephson. "Beautiful old man that he is! and is the pleasantest likeness, the finest combination of power, and beauty, and sweetness,

and spirit, that ever you saw. Such a piece of colour, too! The painter *used all his carmine the first day*, and was forced to go into Reading for a fresh supply. He says that my father's complexion is exactly like the sunny side of a peach, and so is his picture. Imagine how grateful I am! He has come all the way from London to paint this picture as a present to me."

Following Lucas, came Edmund Havell, a young and rising artist from Reading, a lithographer of great ability. He came to paint Dash—Landseer being unable to fulfil his promise because of an accident. "Dash makes an excellent sitter—very grave and dignified, and a little conscious—peeping stealthily at the portrait, as if afraid of being thought vain if he looked at it too long."

These were the diversions which Miss Mitford permitted herself, and when they were over and the approach of winter caused a natural cessation of the hosts of visitors who thronged the cottage during the fine weather, she devoted herself with energy to a new book, to be entitled *Country Stories*, for which Messrs. Saunders & Otley were in negotiation.

CHAPTER XXV

THE STATE PENSION

EARLIER in this book we told how Byron had abstained from dedicating *Childe Harold* to his friend William Harness for fear it might injure the latter's reputation. It was a scruple which Miss Mitford shared with the great poet, otherwise it would have given her the keenest pleasure thus publicly to associate her old friend and companion with one of her dramatic works. Being now assured that her prose was worthy as an offering, she proposed that her new book, the *Country Stories*, should go forth with William Harness's name on the Dedication page. She wrote him on the subject :—

"My dear William,—

"I have only one moment in which to proffer a petition to you. I have a little trumpery volume, *Country Stories*, about to be published. Will you permit me to give these tales some little value in my own eyes by inscribing them (of course, in a few true and simple words,) to you, my very old and most kind friend? I would not dedicate a play to you, for fear of causing you injury in your profession ;

but I do not think that this slight testimony of a very sincere affection could do you harm in that way, for even those who do not allow novels in their house sanction my little books.

Ever affectionately yours,

"M. R. MITFORD."

To this request, particularly gratifying to its recipient, permission was immediately granted, and the volume appeared with the following Dedication :—

"To the Rev. William Harness, whose old hereditary friendship has been the pride and pleasure of her happiest hours, her consolation in the sorrows, and her support in the difficulties of life, this little volume is most respectfully and affectionately inscribed by the Author."

We, who have so far followed Miss Mitford's life, know how just a tribute was this dedication, and at the same time we may be able, imperfectly perhaps, to understand how true was her reference to the sorrows and difficulties with which she had been forced to contend. By this time, under ordinary circumstances, she might have hoped that her pecuniary difficulties were wellnigh overcome ; but this was not to be, and in this year (1837) the liabilities of the Mitford household were so overwhelming and the wherewithal to meet them so slight that Miss Mitford was reduced to the lowest depths of despair.

A view in Swallowfield Park, one of Miss Mitford's favourite scenes.

Taking counsel with William Harness, she wrote a touching appeal, in May, to Lord Melbourne, begging the grant of a State Pension. It was a piteous appeal, and concluded thus :— "My life has been one of struggle and of labour, almost as much withdrawn from the literary as from the fashionable world; but I am emboldened to take this step by the sight of my father's white hairs, and the certainty that such another winter as the last would take from me all power of literary exertion, and send those white hairs in sorrow to the grave."

Letters on the subject were also despatched to the Duke of Devonshire, to Miss Fox and to Lady Dacre in the hope that they would throw the weight of their influence into the petition. "Is all this right?" she asked William Harness. "It may not succeed, but it can do no harm. If it do succeed, I shall owe all to you, who have spirited me up to the exertion. No woman's constitution can stand the wear and tear of all this anxiety. It killed poor Mrs. Hemans, and will, if not averted, kill me."

The most strenuous efforts were made by highly-placed friends to influence Lord Melbourne in the petitioner's favour, among them being those already mentioned, Lord and Lady Radnor, Lord Palmerston, "and many others whom I have never seen, whose talents and character, as well as their rank and station, render their notice and approbation a distinction as well as

an advantage." All this resulted in the granting of the Pension, notice of which was conveyed to the anxious one within a fortnight of the original petition. In addition to this Miss Mitford received private assurances that the sum granted—£100 per annum—was intended merely as an instalment, and that it was hoped to settle it at £300 before long—a forlorn hope, as it happened!

Thus reassured, Miss Mitford renewed her hopeful outlook on life, and the month following was gratified by the receipt of an offer to edit *Finden's Tableaux*, a large and handsome quarto publication of a style common to those days, embellished with extremely beautiful full-page steel engravings by the first artists, round which were written descriptive poetry or prose by writers chosen from the front ranks in Literature. The production of these volumes was very costly, being bound in full leather, lavishly tooled, and they were primarily intended to lie upon drawing-room tables for the amusement and pleasure of visitors. Miss Mitford was, of course, delighted with the offer and gladly accepted it, and one of her first editorial letters was addressed to her "Sweet Love," Miss Barrett, requesting a poem, the payment for which was to be £5. The poem was supplied—it was entitled *A Romance of the Ganges*, and was the first of a goodly number of similar contributions which Miss Barrett supplied to her friend's order. "Depend upon it," wrote Miss Mitford, "the time will come when

those verses of yours will have a money value," a prophecy which, happily, was fulfilled.

Among the letters of the year is one to Miss Jephson on the subject of *Pickwick Papers*. This friend had acknowledged that she had not, as yet, even heard of this successful work, then being published in paper-covered monthly parts. "So you never heard of the *Pickwick Papers*! Well! They publish a number once a month and print 25,000. The bookseller has made about £10,000 by the speculation. It is fun—but without anything unpleasant: *a lady might read it all aloud;* and it is so graphic, so individual, and so true, that you could curtsey to all the people as you met them in the streets. I did not think there had been a place where English was spoken to which *Boz* had not penetrated. All the boys and girls talk his fun—the boys in the streets; and yet they who are of the highest taste like it the most. Sir Benjamin Brodie takes it to read in his carriage between patient and patient; and Lord Denman studies *Pickwick* on the bench whilst the jury are deliberating. *Do* take some means to borrow it."

During the year Miss Barrett's broken health gave cause for great alarm, and she was sent to Torquay in the hope that a lengthy stay in the salubrious climate of that town would restore her. A continuous correspondence was maintained between the two friends, and it is from one despatched in July that we learn of a renewed illness

of Dr. Mitford and of the great strain imposed on his daughter as a consequence. "I am now sitting on the ground outside his door, with my paper on my knee, watching to hear whether he sleeps. Oh! my dearest love, at how high a price do we buy the joy of one great undivided affection, such as binds us heart to heart! For the last two years I have not had a week without anxiety and alarm, so that fear now seems to be a part of my very self; and I love him so much the more tenderly for this clinging fear, and for his entire reliance upon me! I have not left him for a drive, or to drink tea with a friend, for a year." Added to this trouble came the discovery that serious dilapidations in the cottage were becoming too bad to be overlooked, and were an actual menace to the safety of the inmates. The landlady, "a most singular compound of miser and shrew," refused to repair at her own charge and, after carefully considering ways and means, it was decided that the cost of removing would be greater than that of the necessary repairs, and so, to avoid further discomfort to her father, Miss Mitford had the workmen in and the place was renovated piecemeal, a room at a time, necessitating the removal of the furniture from room to room and causing the wearied author endless worry and annoyance. The year wore on and 1838 found the Mitfords in a worse plight than ever, the expenses of the renovations having depleted their finances

alarmingly and they owing money in many quarters. William Harness was at last appealed to to sell out the money in the Funds, and to let Miss Mitford have £600, the balance to be devoted to purchasing an annuity on her own and her father's life. The appeal was couched in such agonized language that Harness agreed, and the debts were paid, but no sooner were they cleared off than Miss Mitford was taken seriously ill with internal trouble, induced by excessive anxiety and overwork, resulting in a double loss occasioned by the doctor's fees and by the enforced cessation from work of the money-earner.

Even at this juncture Miss Mitford's thoughts were only for her father, and in offering thanks to God that he had been spared to her, she also bemoans her lot that she has not strength enough to give her whole life to him, to read to him, to drive out with him, to play cribbage with him, and never be five minutes from his side! "I love him a million times better than ever, and can quite understand that love of a mother for her firstborn, which this so fond dependence produces in the one so looked to."

It is quite evident from the few records of the years 1838, 1839 and on, that Dr. Mitford's increasing age rendered him more and more querulous and exacting in his demands upon his daughter for attention and creature comforts. "He could read, I think," she wrote in 1840, "but somehow to read to himself seems to give him

no pleasure; and if any one else is so kind as to offer to read to him, *that* does not do. They don't know what he likes, and where to skip, and how to lighten heavy parts without losing the thread of the story. By practice I can contrive to do this, even with books that I have never seen before. There's an instinct in it, I think." Fortunately the year was brightened by a reconciliation with Talfourd, but then it was saddened by the suicide of Haydon, who, embittered with the world and largely in debt, sought relief in this terrible fashion. And for Miss Mitford the tragedy was heightened by the fact that, only the week before, he had visited the cottage and left a few valuables "in her charge," as he said, "for a short while." Following this came news, in the summer, from Miss Barrett at Torquay, who had just sustained a tragic bereavement by the death, from drowning, of her brother Edward. He had gone out with a friend, sailing in the Bay of which the sister had a magnificent and extensive view from her windows in the Beacon Terrace.[1] Delightedly watching the little vessel, she was suddenly alarmed by noticing that the occupants appeared to be in difficulties. A sudden squall had arisen, and while the agonized sister watched, impotent, from her invalid-chair, the boat capsized and her brother and his friend both perished.

The tragic news made a deep impression on

[1] The house is now known as "Sea Lawn."

Miss Mitford's mind; indeed she never forgot the incident, and when, many years afterwards, she was compiling her *Recollections* it was she who first gave the story to the world, unconsciously causing untold anguish to her friend, to whom the merest reference to the catastrophe or to Torquay was sufficient to render her prostrate for days. "I have so often been asked what could be the shadow that had passed over that young heart, that, now that time has softened the first agony, it seems to me right that the world should hear the story." When the book was reviewed in 1852 the Brownings were living in Paris and only became aware of the fact that the "veil had been lifted from the private life" of E. B. B. through the call of a journalist employed on the *Revue des Deux Mondes* who had been commissioned to write an article on the Brownings and hesitated to quote the incident, without permission, lest it should cause additional pain to Mrs. Browning. The revelation of the tragic episode, so long and so well kept from the world, grieved and shocked Mrs. Browning beyond measure and resulted in her sending a letter of tender reproof to her dear friend who had been so indiscreet. "You cannot understand," she wrote. "No, you cannot understand, with all your wide sympathy (perhaps, because you are not morbid, and I am), the sort of susceptibility I have on one subject. . . . And now those dreadful words are going the round

of the newspapers, to be verified here, commented on there, gossiped about everywhere; and I, for my part, am frightened to look at a paper as a child in the dark. . . . I feel it deeply; through tears of pain I feel it; and if, as I dare say you will, you think me very foolish, do not on that account think me ungrateful. Ungrateful I never can be to you, my much loved and kindest friend."

Miss Mitford was, naturally, deeply distressed to learn that her kindly-intentioned article had caused mental suffering to her friend, and wrote a most abject reply, which drew from Mrs. Browning a missive tender and full of forgiveness, which is among the gems of her published letters.

But this reference to the Brownings has caused us to anticipate the years somewhat. We must return to the year 1840, full as it was to Miss Mitford of increasing trouble and anxiety. The summer saw her threatened with a calamity as to her beloved garden. It was now practically her only pleasure and recreation, and she was therefore deeply concerned to learn that their shrewish landlady intended to sell the land which it occupied and which the Mitfords rented separately from the house. It comprised about an acre, and they feared that some sordid speculator would purchase it who, knowing the value placed upon it by the tenants, would raise the rent inordinately, a course which, in view of their poverty, would mean its relinquishment.

Fortunately news of the sale came to the knowledge of a friend, who purchased the ground and handed it over to the old tenants rent-free for so long as they required it.

The year 1841 was not less troublous than its predecessor, for it opened with Dr. Mitford lying seriously ill from a chill caught in the discharge of magisterial duties against his physician's advice and his daughter's pleadings. The occasion was the Quarter Sessions at Reading, a combination of business and pleasure—for convivial gatherings succeeded the administration of justice—so dear to Dr. Mitford's heart. It was, indeed, astonishing—Miss Mitford thought it matter for astonishment—that on these occasions her father was capable of exertions unaided, to perform which at home he required the help of three persons. The result was anguish of mind and body for his daughter, who took upon herself the whole duty of nursing the invalid. Rest and warmth were prescribed, but all the daughter's attentions were rendered nugatory by the patient, who disobeyed injunctions like a petulant child, persisting in " getting out of bed, or up in bed, or something as bad," to be followed by periods of irritability which nothing would soothe, not even the being read to, an art in which the nurse excelled. Under these circumstances literary work had to be performed in moments snatched from the bedside of the beloved parent or when, finally exhausted, he sunk to prolonged slumber. Then,

fearful of disturbing him, his devoted daughter sat on a low stool at the foot of the bed, with her writing materials before her, with a chair for table, composing and correcting into the small hours of the morning until, as she said, she nearly fainted.

The natural result was that, upon her father's recovery, she was stricken down from sheer exhaustion and kept to her bed for weeks. Convalescent, she went out in the pony-chaise for an airing with Kerenhappuck her maid and companion, during which a trace broke and the pony bolted. They tore madly along the road, past frightened men who could do nothing to stop the brute, and with the maid sawing ineffectually at the reins which, for greater power, she had wound about her arms. Soon the turnpike-gate was neared, adding to the fear of the terrorized women, who dreaded lest the pony, a famous hunter, would leap it, with results too dreadful to think of. Fortunately the gatekeeper saw them just in time and flung the gate open. On they went in this mad fashion until, by good fortune, the remaining trace pulled the collar in such a way that the pony was nearly choked and he was brought to a standstill. "And since then," wrote Miss Mitford, "I have been very ill. I have not sent for Dr. May. I seldom do, for it frightens my father. After all, a wretched life is mine. Health is gone; but if I can but last while my dear father requires me;

if the little money we have can but last, then it would matter little how soon I, too, were released. We live alone in the world, and I feel that neither will long outlast the other. My life is only valuable as being useful to *him*. I have lived for him and him only; and it seems to me, God, in His infinite mercy, does release those who have so lived, nearly at the same time. The spring is broken, and the watch goes down." With her energies thus reduced, work was at a standstill; the brain refused to be driven, and as no work meant no pay, the household once again drifted into debt, adding fresh terrors to the already over-taxed mind. Misfortunes never come alone and, when the outlook was almost too gloomy to be faced, the Findens stopped payment for work done, a double calamity in that this meant the closing of another source of employment. Creditors became importunate and threatening, and this resulted in another appeal to William Harness that certain of the money still available for use should be taken from investment and devoted to the immediate and pressing needs of the household. "Could you know all I have to undergo and suffer, you would wonder that I am alive—you would rather wonder that I have lived through the winter than that I have failed to provide the means of support for our little household. . . . It has been all my fault now, and if that fault be visited upon my father's white head, and he be sent to jail for

my omissions, I should certainly not long remain to grieve over my sin, for such it is. . . . If you refuse, he may be sent to jail, which he would not survive; or if he survived, it would be with a spirit so broken that he would never leave his arm-chair, which (to say nothing of the misery) would totally disable me from working in any way."

The request was, of course, granted, but the effect was to still further reduce the amount which Harness hoped to hold in trust for the daughter, who, as he knew well, was in no way to blame.

Finally, to close this distressful chapter, this year of misery, Miss Mitford sustained two accidents, both severe, which left her almost a wreck from shock.

CHAPTER XXVI

DEATH OF DR. MITFORD

THE terrible calamity which marred Miss Barrett's health-seeking sojourn in Torquay so unnerved her that it was feared her reason would give way and that she would succumb to her grief. Under these circumstances it was decided to remove her without delay back to Wimpole Street, the long journey, by road, being undertaken in a specially-constructed carriage in which a number of contrivances had been embodied in order to avoid any jarring or other inconvenience to the invalid. From that date onward numberless letters passed between the two friends—Miss Barrett with her burden of sorrow and Miss Mitford with her load of care and poverty.

The friendship was of such a character that each wrote to the other with the greatest freedom and there can be no doubt that this interchange of ideas and outpouring of heart afforded a blessed relief to both, and especially to Miss Mitford, who had so few intimates among women. Indeed we may safely affirm that it was to only

two people—William Harness and Miss Barrett—that Miss Mitford ever really laid bare her true self. Thus in the letters of 1842, a year destined to rank as the most trying and painful in the whole of Miss Mitford's life, we find her telling out frankly the full tale of her miseries.

"It will help you to understand how impossible it is for me to earn money as I ought to do, when I tell you that this very day I received your dear letter, and sixteen others; that then my father brought the newspaper to hear the ten or twelve columns of news from India. By that time there were three parties of people in the garden; eight others arrived soon after—some friends, some acquaintances, some strangers. My father sees me greatly fatigued—much worn—losing my voice even in common conversation; and he lays it all to the last walk or drive—the only thing that keeps me alive—and tells everybody he sees that I am killing myself by walking or driving; and he hopes that I shall at last take some little care of myself and not stir beyond the garden. Is not this the perfection of self-deception? And yet I would not awaken him from this dream—no, not for all the world—so strong a hold sometimes does a light word take of his memory and his heart—he broods over it—cries over it!" This was written to excuse herself from accepting an invitation to town.

Later she details how, when her father was at

last got to sleep, she stole out of the house at night with Flush, the spaniel, and the puppies, for a scamper round the meadows. "How grateful I am," she added, "to that great, gracious Providence who makes the most intense enjoyment the cheapest and the commonest!"—truly she was thankful for the small mercies—"And my father tells me I am killing myself—as if that which is balm and renovation were poison and suicide.

"It is now half-past one and my father has only this very moment gone into his room to bed. He sleeps all the afternoon in the garden, and then would sit up all night to be read to." Then, as if the cares of the household were not enough, the Doctor invited "that gander feast, the Reading Whist Club, out to dine; and then, between helping to cook, and talking and waiting upon the good folks, we got the stiffness rubbed out of our bones in a wonderful manner." The stiffness alluded to was occasioned by being caught in a storm while out driving, but it will be noticed there is no mention of the expense of this "gander feast," arranged, as it was, simply in order to satisfy that father, whom to cross might result in his prostration and tears! "I am content to die," she wrote, "if only preserved from the far bitterer misery of seeing my dear, dear father want his accustomed comforts; content, ay, happy, if that far deeper wretchedness be spared." It was indeed fortunate, in

a sense, that Miss Barrett was willing to read all this and never question the attitude adopted by her friend to this selfish father. Possibly it was patent to all who knew Miss Mitford intimately that to attempt to question the wisdom of her self-sacrifice could only result in adding pain to a heart already over-full with grief. Happily, too, there were occasional breaks to this almost incessant gloom. In July she wrote to say how gratified she had been at learning from a friend that, while travelling in Spain, and being laid up with illness, longing for "some English or English-like book, he received a Spanish translation of *Our Village*. A real compliment, and I tell you of it, just as I told my father, because I know that it will please your dear heart."

Then in September she was greatly gratified by receiving a respectful invitation to lay the foundation stone of a new reading-room in Reading. The invitation was accepted and the pleasure enhanced by the insistence of the "dear papa" that he should make one of the party. The arrival of the Mitfords was not less imposing than the ceremony itself, the four persons absolutely necessary to help the Doctor in and out of his very low carriage being sent on beforehand to await his arrival, amid the cheers of the assembled crowd. The function was followed by a tea-party and concert, to which the visitors stayed. "If ever I am ungrateful

enough to bemoan my isolated position, I ought to think over the assemblage in order to feel the thankfulness that thrilled through my very heart at the true and honest kindness with which I was received. It was an enthusiasm of man, woman, and child—hundreds—thousands—such as I can hardly venture to describe, and it lasted all the time I stayed. Indeed, the pleasure amounted to pain, so confusing was it to hear the over-praise of which I felt myself unworthy. But it was not the praise that was so touching, it was the kindness, the affection. My father cried, K——[1] cried, Dora Smith cried, I think more than all, at the true, honest, generous heartiness of the people."

And there was yet another event to be recorded, something so wonderful that news of it must, perforce, be sent to the friend in London. The Doctor, dining with a friend off a brace of grouse sent by another friend, "took three glasses of claret, and afterwards two glasses more; enjoying them, not taking them, as he does the gravy, medicinally; but feeling the pleasure, the strange pleasure, that gentlemen do feel in the scent and taste of fine wine, especially when shared with a friend. *And he called me again,* '*my treasure,*' always his favourite word for his poor daughter. It rejoices my heart. *Of course its previous omission was accidental.* I feel sure now that he was not angry; but before, I had *so*

[1] Kerenhappuck, her companion.

feared it; and it had *so* grieved me—grieved me to the very bottom of my heart. So that, if it had pleased God to take him *then*, I do believe that I should have died of very grief. I thought that I must have said something, or done something, or left something unsaid or undone, that had displeased him. *Now*, so far as that goes, my heart is at ease, and it is the taking off of a great load."

This was written on November 20. A day or two afterwards the Doctor grew suddenly worse, so bad indeed that his daughter feared for his life. The days were spent in watching and praying by his bedside, with reading from St. John's Gospel, "which he and I both prefer," and with frequent visits from the Shinfield clergyman, who must have noted what was, possibly, hidden from the daughter's eyes, that the old man was sinking fast. By the last day of November his condition was most alarming, so much so that as Dr. May from Reading had not arrived, Miss Mitford set off with Ben, the gardener, in the pony-chaise to fetch him. It was a Sunday evening, pitch-dark, and they had to trust to the pony's instinct to find their way. Dr. May was not at home when they arrived, and, after a fruitless wait for him, and receiving some advice from the physician's partner, they set off home again at seven o'clock. The darkness was still intense, so that they could see little before them, and they had just reached a spot half-way

to home when two footpads sprung at them from the hedge on either side the road. One wrenched the reins from Ben, the other seized Miss Mitford's umbrella; the pony, plunging from the tug at the reins, caused one of the miscreants to swerve in the act of aiming a blow with a bludgeon at Ben. The blow descended on the pony's flanks, making it dart forward with a terrific plunge and then tear madly off home. The suddenness of the whole thing threw off both the men, one of whom fell beneath the chaise and was run over. By a merciful Providence no vehicle or other person was met on the road, for Ben could not control the pony until the cottage was neared, when the sagacious creature slowed up of its own accord and stopped quietly at the door.

No hint of this adventure reached Dr. Mitford, lest the shock should make him worse, although, naturally enough, Miss Mitford would gladly have told him, so shaken and unnerved was she. Weak and ill, the brave and unselfish woman watched by her parent, tending and nursing him, allowing no one to take the principal duties from her; rarely sleeping, and then only when forced to do so from sheer exhaustion, until at last, early on the morning of December 11, the death of her father released her from the long vigil.

"All friends are kind and very soothing," wrote the stricken woman to Miss Barrett, "but not half so soothing as your sweet kindness,

my dearest. Oh! let me think of you as a most dear friend—almost a daughter, for such you have been to me. . . . Everybody is so kind! The principal farmers are striving who shall carry the coffin. Surely this is not common—to an impoverished man—one long impoverished—one whose successor is utterly powerless! This is disinterested, if anything were so, and therefore very touching, very dear. Perhaps I have shed more tears for the gratitude caused by this kindness and other kindnesses than for the great, great grief! That seems to lock up the fountain; this to unseal it. Bless you, my beloved, for all your inimitable kindness! Oh! how *he* loved to bless you! He seldom spoke the dear name without the benediction—'Miss Barrett! dear Miss Barrett! Heaven bless her!' How often has he said that! I seem to love the name the better for that recollection. . . . I am resigned—indeed I am. I know that it is right, and that it is His will."

The funeral was an imposing affair; "the chief gentry of the country sent to request to follow his remains to the grave; the six principal farmers of the parish begged to officiate as his bearers; they came in new suits of mourning, and were so deeply affected that they could hardly lift the coffin. Every house in our village street was shut up; the highway was lined with farmers and tradesmen, in deep mourning, on horseback and in phaetons, who followed the procession;

they again were followed by poor people on foot. The church and churchyard were crowded, and the building resounded with tears and sobs when the coffin was lowered into the vault. The same scene recurred on the ensuing Sunday, when every creature in the crowded congregation appeared in black to hear the sermon—even the very poorest wearing some sign of the mourning that was so truly felt." This was, as may be easily inferred, Miss Mitford's own account of the proceedings, but, as Mr. H. F. Chorley pointed out in his published volume of her letters, although one cannot doubt the sincerity of the report, it was one " utterly baseless on anything like fact, or the feelings of those who knew the whole story. Dr. Mitford was tolerated because she was beloved. The respect paid to his remains was not so much to them as to her."

When all was over, there came the inevitable day of reckoning, and Miss Mitford had to face an appalling list of debts accumulated by her father's extravagance, liabilities amounting to close upon £1,000. The sum seems incredible in view of Miss Mitford's earnings and of the help which had been periodically obtained from William Harness in addition to the State pension. How can such a condition of affairs be accounted for ? A clue is, we think, to be found in a letter which Miss Mitford wrote to a friend some six months before her father died. " At eighty, my

father is privileged to dislike being put out of his way in the smallest degree, as company always does, so that I make it as unfrequent as possible, and the things that weigh upon me are not an occasional bottle or two of port or claret or champagne, but the keeping two horses instead of one, the turning half a dozen people for months into the garden, which ought to be cultivated by one person, and even the building —as I see he is now meditating—a new carriage, when we have already two, but too expensive. These *are* trials, when upon my sinking health and overburdened strength lies the task of providing for them;—when, in short, I have to provide for expenses over which I have no more control than my own dog, Flush. . . . It is too late now for the slightest hope of change; and his affection for me is so great, that to hint at the subject would not only shock him, but perhaps endanger his health."

Thus, with a heritage of liabilities, Miss Mitford came back from her father's funeral to think out some scheme of personal effort which would not only give her something upon which to exist but remove the stigma attaching to her father's name. When the true state of affairs became public property her friends decided to raise a subscription in the hope of clearing the whole amount. Nothing short of complete satisfaction to all creditors would content Miss Mitford, who determined that "everybody shall

be paid, if I have to sell the gown off my back, or pledge my little pension."

The subscription project was taken up very heartily, appeals, signed by many influential people, being printed in the *Times* and *Morning Chronicle*, and by the following March nearly a thousand pounds had been received, with a promise of further donations amounting to some hundreds, the final idea of the promoters being that not only should the debts be paid but that a goodly amount should be handed over to Miss Mitford wherewith to make a fresh start and to provide an annuity. Writing on the subject to Miss Jephson, Miss Mitford intimated that the Queen was among the subscribers, but desired that her name be not mentioned, " as she gives from her private income, and fears being subjected to solicitation (this adds to the compliment, as it proves it is not a matter of form)." In addition to this there were contributions from many of the nobility and notables in the literary and artistic world, thus testifying to the great esteem in which Miss Mitford was held. It must have been very gratifying to her to be thus remembered in this her bitterest hour of need. Nor was this the only evidence of goodwill, for many of the neighbouring gentry vied with each other in paying little attentions to the lone woman, in offers of hospitality and in a hundred small and unostentatious ways, which touched her deeply. " I never before had an idea of my own popularity,

and I have on two or three occasions shed tears of pure thankfulness at reading the letters which have been written to, or about, me. . . . I only pray God that I may deserve half that has been said of me. So far as the truest and humblest thankfulness may merit such kindness, I am, perhaps, not wholly undeserving, for praise always makes me humble. I always feel that I am over-valued; and such is, I suppose, its effect on every mind not exceedingly vainglorious."

Perhaps the most touching of the many kindnesses now showered upon her was that of Mr. George Lovejoy, the famous bookseller of Reading, who made her free of his large and very complete circulating library and afforded her a most lavish supply of books. The Library was founded in the year 1832 by Mr. Lovejoy and came to be regarded as the finest of its kind in the Provinces. He was, himself, a man of considerable learning and possessed amiable characteristics which endeared him to all and sundry, especially to the children, who were in the habit of appealing to him to solve any problems which might be bothering their small heads, whilst he was frequently besieged by them for pieces of string in the peg-top season. And not only did the children consult him, for he gathered about him quite a number of literary people to whom he was indeed a counsellor and friend. His shop was the rendezvous for the County, among the

Mr. George Lovejoy, Bookseller, of Reading.

most frequent visitors being Charles Kingsley—Eversley being but fourteen miles distant—and Miss Mitford, with any literary friends who happened to be calling on her at the time. "In general we can get any books we wish at the excellent Reading library (Lovejoy's); he, or I, have all you mention," wrote Miss Mitford to a friend who had suggested certain books for perusal.

"I have been too much spoiled," she wrote later; "at this moment I have eight sets of books belonging to Mr. Lovejoy. I have every periodical within a week, and generally cut open every interesting new publication—getting them literally the day before publication." The Lovejoy Library was noted from its earliest days for the very fine collection of Foreign works which it contained, and this alone would have made it invaluable to Miss Mitford, whose love for French and Italian literature was remarkable.

Then, too, Mr. Lovejoy undertook little commissions for his friend when she required anything obtained specially in London, getting his London agents to enclose the goods in his book parcel and, when received, despatching it by special messenger to the cottage at Three Mile Cross. Throughout the letters he is frequently referred to as "Dear Mr. Lovejoy," or "My dear friend, Mr. Lovejoy. Nobody certainly ever had such a friend as he is to me, and all his servants and people are as kind as he is himself."

So, with kind friends about her, Miss Mitford strove to forget her sorrow and to devote herself once more to literary work. Unfortunately, however, the cottage was once again showing itself the worse for wear, and it was a question as to whether it should not be given up in favour of some other habitation near at hand. It was at length decided, at the suggestion of Mr. Blandy, of Reading—who was at that time managing Miss Mitford's affairs under instructions from William Harness—that, if the rent could be adjusted to suit Miss Mitford's purse, the cottage should be renovated and she stay on. This was all agreed to, and while the painters and decorators were in possession, Miss Mitford departed to Bath for a fortnight's holiday.

Returning somewhat unexpectedly, she found the workmen dawdling and the maid, who had been left in charge, absent at the theatre, a state of things which stirred her to great activity and indignation, "and the scolding which I found it my duty to administer, quite took the edge off my sadness."

CHAPTER XXVII

LOVE FOR CHILDREN AND LAST DAYS AT THREE MILE CROSS

LOVE of little children was one of the noticeable characteristics of Dr. Mitford's life, and it was one in which his daughter shared. That she entered most fully into the games and pursuits of the village youngsters is evidenced in *Our Village*, where we obtain delightful little portraits of Joe Kirby, Jack Rapley, Jem and Lizzie, which sufficiently indicate the author's knowledge of the child-mind, to say nothing of those breezy, hilarious descriptions of the slide and the cricket-match.

Shortly after Dr. Mitford's death there came into her life a little boy named Henry Taylor—frequently alluded to as "K——'s little boy" in her letters, and as "little Henry" in the *Recollections*, but not to be confounded with the "little Henry" of *Our Village*, who was a lad sometimes hired by the Doctor for the performance of odd jobs.

Henry Taylor was born in Reading—the child of K——, Miss Mitford's companion and hemmer of flounces—and at the mistress's own request the

boy was brought to live at her cottage when he was just upon two years old. He came as a new and welcome interest into her life and, while she petted and spoiled him, gave him wise and tender counsel. "A little boy, called Henry," she wrote of him in her *Recollections*, "the child of the house (son, by the way, to the hemmer of flounces), has watched my ways, and ministered unbidden to my wants and fancies. Long before he could open the outer door, before, indeed, he was half the height of the wand in question" [her favourite walking-stick], "there he would stand, the stick in one hand, and if it were summer time, a flower in the other, waiting for my going out, the pretty Saxon boy, with his upright figure, his golden hair, his eyes like two stars, and his bright, intelligent smile! We were so used to see him there, silent and graceful as a Queen's page, that when he returned to school after the holidays, and somebody else presented the stick and the rose, I hardly cared to take them. It seemed as if something was wrong, I missed him so! Most punctual of petted children!"

Whilst the child was at boarding-school in Reading, a rather serious outbreak of smallpox in the town, and particularly in a house adjoining the School, necessitated his being sent home to the cottage without delay, though not, unfortunately, in time to prevent his being infected. He was extremely ill and his life, at times, despaired of, the mother and Miss Mitford taking it

by turns to watch over and nurse him. In the *Recollections* there is a most touching reference to this incident, which proves how strong was Miss Mitford's affection for the child, how much a mother's heart was hers. Quoting from Leigh Hunt's poetry, she says :—" There is yet another poem for which I must make room. Every mother knows these pathetic stanzas. I shall never forget attempting to read them to my faithful maid, whose fair-haired boy, her pet and mine, was then recovering from a dangerous illness. I attempted to read these verses, and did read as many as I could for the rising in the throat—the *hysterica passio* of poor Lear—and as many as my auditor could hear for her own sobs." And then she quotes those beautiful verses :—" To T. L. H., six years old, during a sickness."

" Sleep breathes at last from out thee,
My little patient boy ;
And balmy rest about thee—
Smooths off the day's annoy.
I sit me down and think
Of all thy winning ways ;
Yet almost wish with sudden shrink
That I had less to praise.
* * * * *
To say he has departed,
His voice, his face is gone !
To feel impatient-hearted
Yet feel we must bear on !
Ah, I could not endure
To whisper of such woe,
Unless I felt this sleep ensure
That it will not be so."

"Little Henry" is one of the few survivors of those who knew Miss Mitford intimately, and he has many tender memories of the kindly woman who, as time went on, made him her constant companion when she walked in the lanes and meadows in and about the neighbourhood. Woodcock Lane, of which we have already made mention, was among her favourite haunts, and thither she would take her way, with little Henry and the dogs, and while she sat with her writing-pad on her knee, would watch the eager child gathering his posies of wild flowers. "Do not gather them all, Henry," was one of her regular injunctions on these occasions, "because some one who has not so many pretty flowers at home as we have may come this way and would like to gather some"; and sometimes she would add, "remember not to take all the flowers from one root, for the plant loves its flowers, and delights to feed and nourish them"—a pretty fancy which the child-mind could understand and appreciate. "Never repeat anything you hear which may cause pain or unhappiness to others" was a precept which often fell from her lips when speaking to the child and it was a lesson which he says he has never forgotten and has always striven to live up to in a long and somewhat arduous life spent here and abroad. Miss Mitford had a great and deep-seated objection to Mrs. Beecher Stowe. It arose principally from disapproval of certain derogatory statements

The "House of Seven Gables," a view on the road to Swallowfield.

about Lord Byron and his matrimonial relations which Mrs. Stowe had expressed to friends of Miss Mitford's and which, after Miss Mitford's death, were published in the work entitled *Lady Byron Vindicated.* The reason for this attitude of mind on Miss Mitford's part is not difficult to understand when we remember that her great friend, William Harness, was among the earliest and dearest of Lord Byron's friends. Thus, when *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in this country, Miss Mitford refused to give any credence to the revelations it contained, and in this connection it is interesting to record that it was among the few books which she counselled the boy not to read.

For the children in the village she had ever a kind word and smile, inquiring why they did this or that when playing their games, and nothing delighted her more than to come upon a game of cricket being played by the youngsters, for then she would watch the game through, applauding vigorously and calling out encouraging remarks to the players, all of whom referred to her as the "kind lady."

During the year 1844 Queen Victoria paid an unofficial visit to the Duke of Wellington at Strathfieldsaye, and Miss Mitford conceived the idea that it would please the Queen to be greeted on the roadside by the village children. With the co-operation of the farmers, who lent their wagons, some two hundred and ninety

children were carried to a point near Swallowfield —some few miles from Three Mile Cross along the Basingstoke Road—each carrying a flag provided at Miss Mitford's expense and by the industry of her maid, Jane, who was very skilful at such work. The wagons were decked out with laurels and bunting and made a very brave show when the Queen, escorted by the Duke, passed by them. "We all returned—carriages, wagons, bodyguard and all—to my house, where the gentlefolk had sandwiches and cake and wine, and where the children had each a bun as large as a soup-plate, made doubly nice as well as doubly large, a glass of wine, and a mug of ale"—rather advanced drinks for children, but probably thin enough to do no harm. "Never was such harmless jollity! Not an accident! not a squabble! not a misword! It did one's very heart good. . . . To be sure it was a good deal of trouble, and Jane is done up. Indeed, the night before last we none of us went to bed. But it was quite worth it."

All this sounds very delightful and light-hearted and truly the years seemed now to be passing very gently and kindly with the warm-hearted woman who had, hitherto, suffered so much.

There were, of course, the usual ailments due to advancing age, which had to be endured, but, with short trips to town and a long holiday at Taplow, these ailments had no serious, immediate effect on Miss Mitford's general health.

In 1846 the dear friend, Miss Barrett, was married to Robert Browning, an incident which proved—so Miss Mitford recorded—that "Love really is the wizard the poets have called him'. There is no mention of a wedding-present being despatched from Three Mile Cross—it will be remembered that the marriage was a somewhat hurried and secret affair, due to Mr. Barrett's opposition to the whole idea—but we do know that when the happy couple left for Italy *via* Paris they took with them Flush, the dog, which Miss Mitford had sent as a gift to her friend some years before. Flush was a character, and figures very much in the Barrett-Browning correspondence from 1842 to 1848; he died much loved and lamented, and now lies buried in the Casa Guidi vaults.

All the world knows what a wonderful marriage that was—two hearts beating as one—and how remarkable and romantic was the courtship, the story of which, from Mrs. Browning's own pen, is so exquisitely told in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*—the "finest sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare's," was Robert Browning's delighted comment—"the very notes and chronicle of her betrothal," as Mr. Edmund Gosse writes of them, when he relates how prettily and playfully they were first shown to the husband for whom they had been expressly written. But—and this is why we make mention of them here—before ever they were shown to the hus-

band they had been despatched to Miss Mitford for her approval and criticism, and she urged that they be published in one of the Annuals of the day. To this suggestion Mrs. Browning would not accede, but consented at last to allow them to be privately printed, for which purpose they were again sent to Miss Mitford, who arranged for their printing in Reading—probably through her friend, Mr. Lovejoy—under the simple title of *Sonnets: by E. B. B.*, and on the title-page were the additional words :—" Reading : Not for Publication : 1847."

Miss Mitford often made complaint of the number of visitors who thronged her cottage, but now that she had none but herself to consider she seems to have found her chief delight in receiving and entertaining, in quiet fashion, the many literary folk who made pilgrimages to her, visits which were always followed by a correspondence which must have fully occupied her time. This year, 1847, brought Ruskin to the cottage through the introduction of Mrs. Cockburn (the Mary Duff of Lord Byron). " John Ruskin, the Oxford Undergraduate, is a very elegant and distinguished-looking young man, tall, fair, and slender—too slender, for there is a consumptive look, and I fear a consumptive tendency. . . . He must be, I suppose, twenty-six or twenty-seven, but he looks much younger, and has a gentle playfulness—a sort of pretty waywardness, that is quite charming. And now we write to each

Miss Mitford's Cottage at Swallowfield.
(From a contemporary engraving.)

other, and I hope love each other as you and I do "—Miss Mitford's note on the visit, written to another friend, Mr. Charles Boner, in America.

Hearing that William Chambers, the Edinburgh publisher, was that year in London, an invitation was sent to him to call at the cottage, and while there he, his hostess and Mr. Lovejoy discussed a project which had long been occupying the minds of Miss Mitford and her bookseller-friend, on the subject of " Rural Libraries."

Mr. Chambers refers to the visit in his *Autobiography.* " The pleasantest thing about the visit was my walk with the aged lady among the green lanes in the neighbourhood—she trotting along with a tall cane, and speaking of rural scenes and circumstances. . . . I see she refers to this visit, stating that she was at the time engaged along with Mr. Lovejoy in a plan for establishing lending libraries for the poor, in which, she says, I assisted her with information and advice. What I really advised was that, following out a scheme adopted in East Lothian, parishes should join in establishing itinerating libraries, each composed of different books, so that, being shifted from place to place, a degree of novelty might be maintained for mutual advantage."

In any case, this Mitford-Lovejoy project was well considered and, after many delays, the two friends issued a little four-page pamphlet (now very rare) with the front page headed

"Rural Libraries," followed by a circular letter in which was set forth the origin of the scheme —due to a request from the young wife of a young clergyman in a country parish who wanted to stimulate the parishioners to the reading of sound literature—and an invitation to interested persons to correspond with "M. R. M., care of Mr. Lovejoy, Reading." The rest of the pamphlet was occupied with a list of some two hundred titles of books recommended, among them being *Our Village*, the inclusion of which caused Miss Mitford to tell a friend that she "noticed Mr. Lovejoy had smuggled it in." Whether anything definite resulted from the distribution of this pamphlet is not certain, but the labour it entailed is a proof of the interest which both Miss Mitford and her coadjutor had in matters affecting the education of the people.

By the year 1850 the cottage again became so bad as to be almost uninhabitable—"the walls seem to be mouldering from the bottom, crumbling, as it were, like an old cheese; and whether anything can be done to it is doubtful," and, acting under Dr. May's advice, it was decided to leave the old place for good. The neighbourhood was scoured in the endeavour to find something suitable, and at last the very thing was found at Swallowfield, three miles further along the Basingstoke Road. "It is about six miles from Reading along this same road, leading up from which is a short ascending lane, terminated by the

small dwelling, with a court in front, and a garden and paddock behind. Trees overarch it like the frame of a picture, and the cottage itself, though not pretty, yet too unpretending to be vulgar, and abundantly snug and comfortable, leading by different paths to all my favourite walks, and still within distance of my most valuable neighbours."

The removal, "a terrible job," involving, among other items, the cartage and re-arranging of four tons of books, took place during the third week of September, 1851, just in time to enable the household to get nicely settled in before the winter.

"And yet it was grief to go," she wrote. "There I had toiled and striven, and tasted as deeply of bitter anxiety, of fear, and of hope, as often falls to the lot of woman. There, in the fulness of age, I had lost those whose love had made my home sweet and precious. Alas! there is no hearth so humble but it has known such tales of joy and of sorrow! Friends, many and kind, had come to that bright garden, and that garden room. The list would fill more pages than I have to give. There Mr. Justice Talfourd had brought the delightful gaiety of his brilliant youth, and poor Haydon had talked more vivid pictures than he ever painted. The illustrious of the last century—Mrs. Opie, Jane Porter, Mr. Cary—had mingled there with poets, still in their earliest dawn. It was a heart-tug to leave

that garden. . . . I walked from the one cottage to the other on an autumn evening, when the vagrant birds, whose habit of assembling here for their annual departure gives, I suppose, its name of Swallowfield to the village, were circling and twittering over my head; and repeated to myself the pathetic lines of Hayley as he saw these same birds gathering upon his roof during his last illness:—

> 'Ye gentle birds, that perch aloof,
> And smooth your pinions on my roof,
> Preparing for departure hence
> Ere winter's angry threats commence;
> Like you, my soul would smooth her plume
> For longer flights beyond the tomb.
> May God, by Whom is seen and heard
> Departing man and wandering bird,
> In mercy mark us for His own
> And guide us to the land unknown!'

Thoughts soothing and tender came with those touching lines, and gayer images followed. Here I am in this prettiest village, in the cosiest and snuggest of all cabins; a trim cottage garden, divided by a hawthorn hedge from a little field guarded by grand old trees; a cheerful glimpse of the high road in front, just to hint that there is such a thing as the peopled world; and on either side the deep, silent, woody lanes that form the distinctive character of English scenery."

CHAPTER XXVIII

SWALLOWFIELD AND THE END

IT will be remembered that some time after the correspondence with Sir William Elford had been well established, he suggested to Miss Mitford that much of the literary criticism contained in the letters was valuable and might be edited with a view to publication. To this Miss Mitford would not consent at the time, for, although the idea appealed to her, she feared that her rather outspoken comments on contemporary authors might, if published during their lifetime, lead to unpleasantness which it were wiser to avoid. Many years had now elapsed since the suggestion was made, and many changes had, in consequence, taken place. The death of a large number of the authors mentioned had removed Miss Mitford's principal objection. She herself was now a comparatively old woman, with a maturer judgment, whose criticism was therefore more likely to command respect, and as the death of her father had increased her leisure for the performance of literary work—and she was still unwilling to tackle the long-

projected novel—she arranged with Miss Elford (Sir William being dead) to gather the letters together and forward them to Three Mile Cross. The task thus undertaken was both congenial and easy, and by the time of her removal to Swallowfield she had made such progress that it was decided to publish without delay. Mr. Bentley, who was approached on the subject, suggested that the work be amplified and issued in three volumes under the title of *Recollections of Books*. Acting on this advice, Miss Mitford completed the work, after she had settled herself in her new home, and by 1852 the book was published under the more imposing title of *Recollections of a Literary Life, and Selections from my Favourite Poets and Prose Writers*. It was dedicated to Henry F. Chorley, one of a number of young men whose dramatic and literary talent had brought him under the author's notice some years before and which, as usual, resulted in the establishment of a warm friendship between the two. The book was much sought after and, on the whole, was well received, although certain of the critics thought the title too ambiguous—a criticism which Miss Mitford disarmed, somewhat, by admitting, in the Preface, that it gave a very imperfect idea of the contents. News of her removal took many old friends to Swallowfield, anxious to see whether the change was for the better. Ruskin was delighted with it; so too, in a modified sense, was

Miss Mitford's Cottage at Swallowfield, in 1913.

young James Payn, "that splendidly handsome lad of twenty-three—full of beauty, mental and physical, and with a sensibility and grace of mind such as I have rarely known."

Mr. Payn's *Literary Recollections*, published in 1884, contain some delightful pen-portraiture of his old friend, whom he calls "the dear little old lady, looking like a venerable fairy, with bright sparkling eyes, a clear, incisive voice, and a laugh that carried you away with it." Here, too, came Charles Boner from America, and Mr. Fields, the publisher, the latter bringing with him Nathaniel Hawthorne—"whom he found starving and has made almost affluent by his encouragement and liberality"—with each of whom a constant correspondence was afterwards maintained. Many of the letters to Mr. Boner are to be found in his *Memoirs*, published in 1871, while Mr. Fields gives a charming reminiscent sketch of Miss Mitford in his *Yesterdays with Authors*, published in 1872. Like all the visitors to Swallowfield, Mr. Fields took a great fancy to "little Henry," and at Miss Mitford's own request he agreed that when the boy should be fourteen years of age he should be sent to America to be apprenticed to the publisher's business of which Mr. Fields was the head. The arrangement was one which gave the keenest delight to Miss Mitford, who was most anxious that her little companion should be properly and adequately provided for. Un-

fortunately (or fortunately—for little Henry eventually became a Missionary), the arrangement fell through, but Miss Mitford did her best to provide for the boy's welfare by making him her sole legatee.

Among the letters of 1851, written just prior to her removal, Miss Mitford frequently mentioned Charles Kingsley, who had by this time made himself felt as a strong man in the neighbouring village of Eversley, in addition to the fame which his literary work had brought him. "I hope to know him when I move," wrote Miss Mitford, "for he visits many of my friends." In another letter she remarked:—"*Alton Locke* is well worth reading. There are in it world-wide truths nicely put, but then it is painful and inconclusive. Did I tell (perhaps I did) that the author begged Mr. Chapman to keep the secret?" [of the authorship], "and Chapman was prepared to be as mysterious as Churchill on the 'Vestiges' question, when he found Mr. Kingsley had told everybody, and that all his fibs were falsehoods thrown away!"

It was not long, however, before Mr. Kingsley called at the cottage and commenced a friendship which lasted until Miss Mitford's death. She found him "charming—that beau-ideal of a young poet, whom I never thought to see—frank, ardent, spirited, soft, gentle, high-bred above all." It was a friendship which ripened rapidly, for Kingsley loved to discuss deep social

questions with this learned little woman who, although at first she did not like his opinions, came to see that he was not far wrong and indeed developed into one of his most ardent supporters. In the October of 1852, the first year of their friendship, Kingsley wrote a sonnet which he dedicated

"To the Authoress of 'Our Village.'

"The single eye; the daughter of the light,
Well pleased to recognize in lowliest shade
Each glimmer of its parent ray, and made,
By daily draughts of brightness, inly bright;
The style severe, yet graceful, trained aright
To classic depths of clearness and repaid
By thanks and honour from the wise and staid;
By pleasant skill to blame and yet delight,
And hold communion with the eloquent throng
Of those who shaped and toned our speech and song;
All these are yours. The same examples here,
You in rich woodland, me on breezy moor,
With kindred aims the same sweet path along,
To knit in loving knowledge rich and poor."

It was a beautiful tribute, which naturally touched the warm heart of its recipient.

"Oh! my dear Mr. Kingsley," she wrote, "how much surprised and touched and gratified I have been by that too flattering but most charming sonnet! Such praise from such a person is indeed most precious. I will not say that I never dreamt of your sending any compliments to myself, because I am sure that you would not suspect me of such vanity, but I must tell you how heartily I thank you, especially for the

lines which join us together in intention and purpose. . . . I wonder whether you always leave people liking you so very much more than they seem to have a right to do! and whether it is your fault or mine that I talked to you as if I had known you ever since you were a boy! Pardon the impertinence, if it be one, and believe me ever

"Your obliged and faithful friend,
"M. R. MITFORD."

One result of the residence at Three Mile Cross, amid the dilapidations of the later years, was the acute rheumatism from which Miss Mitford began to suffer before her removal and which, as the years crept on, got a firmer hold of her system. The consequence was that often, for weeks at a time, she was not able to walk a step, and had to be carried bodily downstairs by Sam, her new man-of-all-work, assisted by K——, whom he had married. This absence of walking exercise was a great hardship, for it was among her chief delights to ramble round the lanes with the dogs, seeking the earliest wild blooms and, with the aid of her favourite crook-stick, gathering the honey suckle as it rioted in the hedge-tops. So, with such exercise impossible, recourse was had to the pony-chaise, wherein, with either Sam or K——, for driver, they would amble quietly around the countryside or into Swallowfield Park, near by, where, if they were at home, there

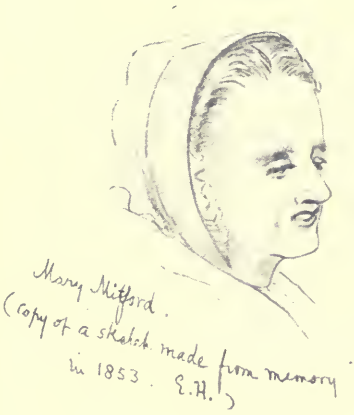
Mary Russell Mitford.
(From a painting by John Lucas, 1852.)

was always a sure welcome from Lady Russell or her daughters.

It was during one of these drives that the accident occurred which was to render her still more helpless and to hasten her end. It was caused by the overturn of the chaise, which threw the occupants with great force on to the hard gravelled road. No bones were broken, but the nerves of the hip and thigh were bruised and shattered, and there was some injury to the spine which, though not noticed at the time, soon developed seriously. A long and painful illness was the result, during which the patient suffered the greatest agony, frequently unable to move in order to change her position while in bed. Lady Russell was a frequent and daily visitor, coming through the mud and rain —for it was winter—to bring comforts for mind and body to her sick friend. The spring of 1853 saw a slight change for the better, and among the old friends who came to visit the invalid was Lucas, the painter, who succeeded in getting his old patroness to sit for another portrait. Miss Mitford was delighted with the result—the expression she thought was wonderfully well-caught, "so thoughtful, happy, tender —as if the mind were dwelling in a pleasant frame on some dear friend." With the approach of summer she had gained sufficient strength to walk out into the garden, where, under a great acacia tree, and near to a favourite syringa-bush,

she had a garden-seat and wrote, when not too weary. Here, and in her bedroom, she worked at last on the novel, so long put off. By the end of 1853 it was in the printer's hands, and every effort was being made to publish it early in 1854. "*Atherton* has twice nearly killed me," wrote Miss Mitford to William Harness, "once in writing—now, very lately, in correcting the proofs." Talfourd, hearing of his old friend's illness, went to see her in March of 1854 and sat by her bedside much affected at the change he saw in her. "All the old friendship came back upon both, as in the many years when my father's house was a second home to him. We both, I believe, felt it to be a last parting"—and that, indeed, it was, for Talfourd died, while delivering a judgment, a fortnight later! The news of his death was a severe shock to Miss Mitford.

Early in April, 1854, *Atherton* was published in three volumes by Messrs. Hurst & Blackett, and, to the author's great delight, Mr. Hurst sent her word that Mr. Mudie had told him the demand was so great as to oblige him to have four hundred copies in circulation. The Dedication was "To her Dear Friend, Lady Russell, whose Sympathy has Cheered the Painfullest Hours, as her Companionship has Gladdened the Brightest," and in the Preface she set forth in detail the awful sufferings which she was forced to endure while writing the work, "being often obliged to have the ink-glass held for me, because



Mary Russell Mitford.
(From a pencil sketch lent by W. H. Hudson, Esq.)

I could not raise my hand to dip the pen in the ink."

Frequent letters from Mrs. Browning, in Rome, came to cheer her, urging that, if the invalid could not write herself, perhaps K——, could send a line of news now and again. William Harness came for a day and, finding his old playmate and friend so distressed, stayed three weeks. He could see, all too plainly, that the frail body would not last long, and he also found that she was troubled in spirit, troubled at her lack of faith and by wandering thoughts which obtruded in her prayers. Every day, and frequently during the day, either Lady Russell or one of her daughters came and sat with the invalid, being sometimes accompanied by a mutual friend, the Rev. Hugh Pearson, Rector of Sonning—a parish nearly ten miles distant—who drove over as often as he could be spared from his parochial duties. To him, as to William Harness, Miss Mitford talked long and earnestly on spiritual matters, while he tried to remove her doubts and bring comfort to her anxious soul. As a means to this end he arranged to administer the Sacrament to her, but was frequently put off because, as she said, the thought of it agitated her so much. "Be sure, dearest friend," she wrote, "that I do not fail in meditation, such as I can give, and prayer. It is my own unworthiness and want of an entire faith that troubles me. But I am a good deal revived by sitting at the open window,

in this sweet summer air, looking at the green trees and the blue sky, and thinking of His goodness who made this lovely world."

To William Harness she wrote, in August, telling him that she had, at last, received the Sacrament at Mr. Pearson's hands, together with Sam and her friend, Mrs. C. Stephens. "I wish you had been here also," she pathetically added. Later, in September, she wrote—"I wish you were sitting close to me at this moment, that we might talk over your plans . . . Swallowfield churchyard, the plain tablet, and the walking funeral have only one objection—that my father and mother lie in Shinfield Church, and that there is room left above them for me. But I greatly dislike where the vault is—just where all the schoolboys kick their heels. After all, I leave that to you—I mean the whole affair of the funeral. It is very doubtful if I shall live till October. At present I am better . . . and now put my feet upon *your* chair. You will not like it the less for having contributed to my comfort. I am still as cheerful as ever, which surprises people much." So she lingered, writing whenever possible to distant friends, keenly anxious to hear the latest literary news and delighting in the knowledge that a novel (*Philip Lancaster*) had just been dedicated to her.

To Mr. Kingsley she wrote:—"The kindness of your letter, dearest Mr. Kingsley, and those sweet words of sweet Mrs. Kingsley did me

Swallowfield Churchyard, wherein Miss Mitford lies buried.

literally good. My heart warmed to her from the first, as the only realization I have ever seen of my vision of a Poet's Wife. May God in His mercy restore her health and spare you long to each other and to the world. There are few such couples."

In the autumn she received the following charming lines from Walter Savage Landor, whom she first met, many years before, at Talfourd's dinner-table :—

"The hay is carried; and the Hours
Snatch, as they pass, the linden flowers;
And children leap to pluck a spray
Bent earthward, and then run away.
Park-keeper, catch me those grave thieves,
About whose frocks the fragrant leaves
Sticking and fluttering, here and there,
No false nor faltering witness bear.

"I never view such scenes as these
In grassy meadow, girt with trees,
But comes a thought of her who now
Sits with serenely patient brow
Amid deep sufferings. None hath told
More pleasant tales to young and old.
Fondest was she of Father Thames,
But rambled in Hellenic streams;
Nor even there could any tell
The country's purer charms so well
As Mary Mitford.

"Verse! go forth
And breathe o'er gentle breasts her worth.
Needless the task . . . but, should she see
One hearty wish from you and me,
A moment's pain it may assuage—
A rose-leaf on the couch of Age."

On January 7, 1855, Miss Mitford wrote to a friend :—" It has pleased Providence to preserve to me my calmness of mind, clearness of intellect, and also my power of reading by day and by night, and which is still more, my love of poetry and literature, my cheerfulness, and my enjoyment of little things. This very day, not only my common pensioners, the dear robins, but a saucy troop of sparrows, and a little shining bird of passage, whose name I forget, have all been pecking at once at their tray of bread-crumbs outside the window. Poor pretty things ! how much delight there is in these common objects, if people would but learn to enjoy them : and I really think that the feeling for these simple pleasures is increasing with the increase of education." On the next day she wrote to Mr. Pearson, urging him to decide when he would come and dine with a mutual friend, for " if you wish for another cheerful evening with your old friend, there is no time to be lost."

Two days later, at five o'clock in the afternoon, with her hand in that of Lady Russell, who had been with her all day, she passed peacefully away, so calmly that her friend was scarcely conscious of the passing.

Thus ended the life of this remarkable woman—remarkable alike for her versatile genius as for her abiding faith in her father and the fortitude with which she accepted and patiently bore the

many vicissitudes through which she was forced to pass.

On January 18, 1855, she was laid to rest in Swallowfield Churchyard, in a spot which she had chosen. Originally it was not within the churchyard proper, being on the fringe of Swallowfield Park; but, to humour her, the railings were diverted and the little plot was thus made available. It was a simple funeral, the only mourners at the graveside being her two executors—the Rev. William Harness and Mr. George May, her physician—and her two servants, Sam and his wife, K——.

The grave is now marked by a simple granite cross, the cost of which was borne by a few old friends.

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